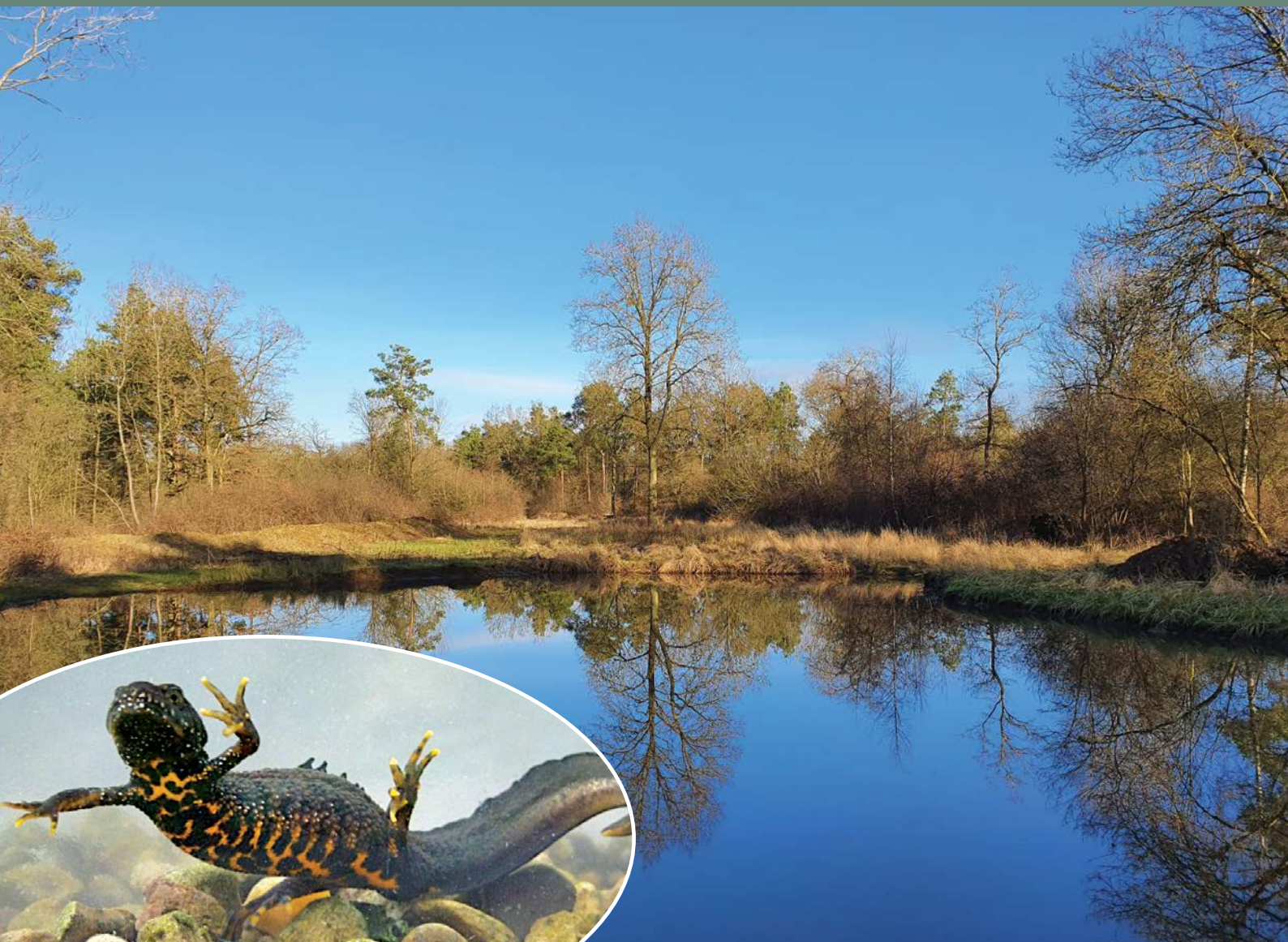


Habitat creation and restoration for great crested newts

JANUARY 2020



NatureSpace District Licensing scheme: compensation sites update



A new clean water pond created at Whitecross Green Wood SSSI, Cherwell District Council

Foreword

The Newt Conservation Partnership has now been the delivery body of the great crested newt District Level Licensing scheme in the South Midlands for two years. Results from our first year of monitoring, a vital part of the scheme, are very encouraging: we have seen great crested newts colonising ponds almost immediately at some sites and the quality of the new habitats is generally looking excellent.

District Licensing is a new strategic approach to compensating the impacts of development on great crested newts. Our focus is on making sure that we see an overall gain in the status of the newt populations at the District Level, and ensuring these populations are healthy and expanding across the countryside. This will result in better conservation outcomes rather than trying to retain populations with poor long-term viability in urbanised, heavily managed environments.

By providing plenty of high quality, clean water ponds with natural meadows, woodland and scrub for terrestrial habitat, there is a much better chance that newts will not only survive in our landscapes but spread back to their former range. Importantly, this is supported by an extensive monitoring programme designed to ensure the scheme is delivering its conservation goals.

Building on the long experience of the Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust and Freshwater Habitats Trust, the new approach could see the start of a better future for one of our most charismatic animals and the rich and diverse freshwater and terrestrial habitats they depend on. Once again, great crested newts could become common and abundant, a real example of net gain for freshwater biodiversity.

Dr Tony Gent

Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust

Directors for the Newt Conservation Partnership

Dr Jeremy Biggs

Freshwater Habitats Trust



Staff members of the Newt Conservation Partnership, Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust and Freshwater Habitats Trust.

Introduction

The Newt Conservation Partnership has been established to create high quality aquatic and terrestrial compensation habitat for the NatureSpace great crested newt District Licensing scheme, which is currently operating in 16 LPAs across the Midlands.

What is District Licensing?

The great crested newt District Level Licensing scheme is an alternative approach to newt mitigation licensing for developments. Funds from developers are used to implement a long-term, landscape-scale conservation strategy for great crested newts, while streamlining the process for developers and reducing the delays they face.

The scheme was developed by a consortium of organisations including NatureSpace and the national conservation non-governmental organisations Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust and Freshwater Habitats Trust.

Strategic conservation

For every pond lost which is predicted to be occupied by great crested newts, we are required to create a minimum of four new ponds (although we aim to create eight new ponds for every one lost), as well as ensuring suitable terrestrial habitat is in place.

Habitat creation is guided by the District Licensing scheme's Implementation Strategy, which sets out the objectives of the scheme for great crested newt conservation, including conservation priority zones (see map on centre pages), best practice principles for newt habitat creation and management, and a monitoring framework to assess the outcome of the scheme for great crested newt conservation at the site and landscape scales.

Ongoing support

As part of our monitoring programme, we make annual visits to compensation sites to assess if any management is required to maintain the habitat in good condition for great crested newts.

Management of the ponds and terrestrial habitat is carried out by both the Newt Partnership and the landowner, with the landowner receiving a management plan and annual payments to cover the cost of any management needed. Agreements with landowners are on a 5-year rolling contract to allow for flexibility, with a commitment to provide funding to landowners for at least 25 years.



Great crested newt

The largest of our native UK newt species, great crested newt numbers are declining across the UK and Europe due to habitat loss and land-use change. Newts prefer clean water ponds with plenty of vegetation and no fish. Once mature, newts spend the majority of their time in terrestrial habitat and usually only return to ponds during spring to breed.



One of the first ponds created for the NatureSpace District Licensing scheme at Shabbington Wood SSSI.

Compensation sites

The Newt Partnership was founded in 2018 and already we have created 57 and restored 8 clean water ponds across 26 sites. We are currently well ahead of impacts from development (to date, six ponds have been lost to development through the District Licensing scheme). We have ambitious plans for larger-scale, multi-phase habitat creation projects to begin in 2020.



At Robinswood Hill County Park, three over-shaded, late succession ponds were restored (Gloucester City Council)

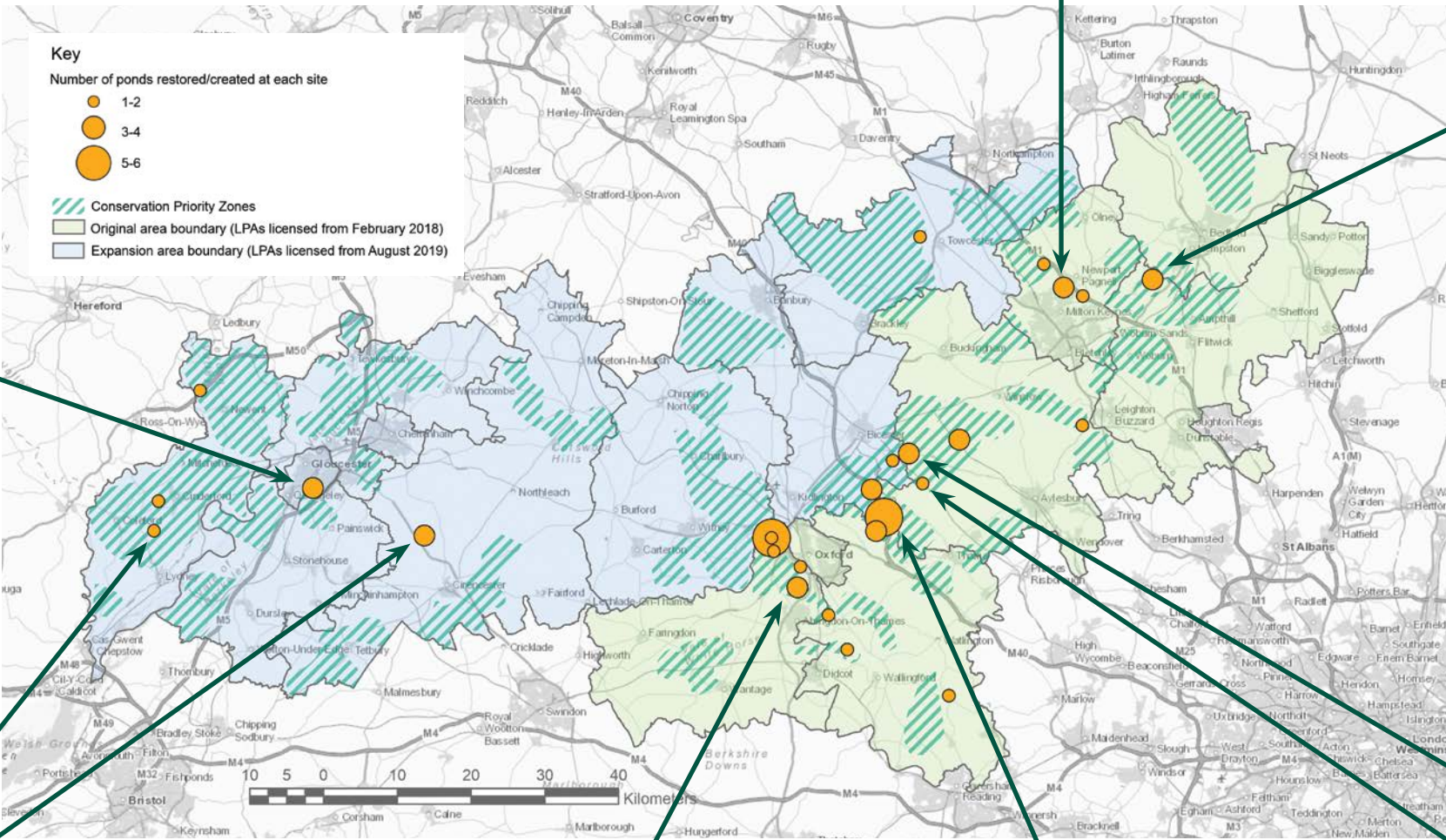


Two new ponds created at the Nagshead RSPB reserve (Forest of Dean District Council)



Four new ponds created on a privately owned farm in Gloucestershire (Cotswold District Council)

Compensation sites where ponds have been created or restored as part of the District Licensing scheme



The new ponds at Millenium Woodland are regularly visited by dog walkers, therefore this pond was fenced to reduce the negative impacts from dogs (Milton Keynes Council)



A landowner with one of his three new clean water ponds created on a farm in Bedfordshire (Central Bedfordshire Council)



Inspecting new ponds at Leaches Farm (Aylesbury Vale District Council)



Supervising creation of three new ponds at a farm in Oxfordshire (Vale of White Horse District Council)



Our very first pond at Shabbington Woods SSSI (Aylesbury Vale District Council)



Aerial view of newly dug woodland pond at Whitecross Green SSSI (Cherwell District Council)

Great crested newt best practice habitat creation and management

We aim to increase the number of high quality occupied ponds and extent of suitable terrestrial habitat for newts, while also improving landscape connectivity by linking occupied sites. Site selection is key to the delivery of high quality aquatic and terrestrial habitat for great crested newts.

Our compensation sites are carefully chosen so that new or restored ponds have a clean water source, a high chance of population viability and are within range of an existing newt population to maximise the chance of natural colonisation. We aim to reach a Habitat Suitability Index of 0.7 for each pond, and undertake extensive pre-surveys to ensure we are not negatively impacting on existing high value biological or archaeological features.

Pond design

We aim to create ponds which are part of a network or complex as this provides greater diversity for newts and other wildlife, while also improving their resilience to impacts such as climate change. Ponds are designed to have extensive shallow margins as these areas provide a rich habitat for plants and insects, which in turn provide prey for birds, amphibians and small mammals. We create permanent and semi-permanent ponds as both are suitable for great crested newts and important for wildlife.

Terrestrial habitat

To date, the majority of our compensation sites have been located in high quality semi-natural habitat – woodland, scrub and rough grassland. By creating networks of clean water ponds away from existing breeding ponds, but within dispersal distance, we have expanded the amount of high quality terrestrial habitat directly available to great crested newts (i.e. within 250 m of a breeding pond) by at least 298 hectares. This is critical for newts as they spend most of their life in terrestrial habitat.

Now that the scheme is better established, we have the opportunity to undertake more ambitious projects by choosing sites where there is scope for improving or restoring low-quality terrestrial habitat, including grassland and arable land.



Understanding the substrate is crucial and informs a pond's design



Examples of hibernacula created using cut timber, spoil and brash at Rushbeds Wood and Robinswood Hill Country Park

Monitoring our success

Our compensation sites are surveyed annually to monitor great crested newt populations and evaluate management requirements of the aquatic and terrestrial habitat. In addition, we are also carrying out landscape-scale monitoring across the Midlands to assess background trends in the wider great crested newt population.

Results of 2019 monitoring

In spring 2019 we began our first year of monitoring, and considering many of the ponds were only a few months old at the time of survey, results were promising.

We surveyed all compensation sites (12 in total) using environmental DNA testing and results confirmed that great crested newts had colonised new ponds in 42% of sites. Observational surveys also noted the presence of newt eggs in two ponds, demonstrating the created habitat was being used for breeding within 12 months.

Where population assessments were undertaken, peak counts of newts in created ponds, in some cases, exceeded those in existing ponds on the same site. Mean Habitat Suitability Index of most ponds (all less than one year old at the time of assessment) has reached or exceeded our target of 0.7, and we are confident that once matured and vegetated all ponds will have exceeded this target.

Results from this first year of monitoring provide a baseline for future surveys and we expect to see continued expansion of newt populations and increased pond occupancy. We will use feedback from this monitoring to continuously evaluate our pond design and site selection process to ensure our habitat creation benefits great crested newts and other wildlife as much as possible.



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During population monitoring, common toads were found breeding at three out of four sites



A male and female great crested newt and a male smooth newt caught during bottle trapping at one of the compensation sites

Wider benefits

Our habitat creation is not only benefiting great crested newts, but also other freshwater and pond-associated wildlife.

While carrying out population monitoring at a subset of our compensation sites, we found that three out of four sites had already been colonised by the UK Priority species common toad, and all sites had been colonised by smooth newt and common frog.

In future, we aim to carry out more extensive plant and animal surveys as part of the monitoring programme to assess how other species are using the created habitat.

About us

The **Newt Conservation Partnership** is a not-for-profit, community-benefit society whose sole purpose is creating and managing high quality habitat for great crested newts, using funds from developers. Our staff are all seconded from the Freshwater Habitats Trust (www.freshwaterhabitats.org.uk) and Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust (www.arc-trust.org.uk).

Our partner NatureSpace Partnership works with developers and participating local authorities to assess development proposals under the new District Licensing scheme, and advise developers on the scheme's requirements. More information can be found on their website: www.naturespaceuk.com.

"All the staff at the Newt Partnership have been incredibly friendly, enthusiastic and professional. The process from the initial contact up to contractors finishing the ponds has been flawless. I look forward to developing further projects."

Nigel Fisher

Conservator of Wytham Woods,
University of Oxford



Participating LPAs currently include: Aylesbury Vale District Council, Bedford Borough Council, Central Bedfordshire Council, Cheltenham Borough Council, Cherwell District Council, Cotswold District Council, Forest of Dean District Council, Gloucester City Council, Milton Keynes Council, Oxford City Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, South Northamptonshire Council, Stroud District Council, Tewkesbury Borough Council, West Oxfordshire District Council and Vale of the White Horse District Council.



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