



Hallgates to Elms Farm

Leicester

Winter Bird Habitat Assessment

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Executive Summary

Introduction	- TEP was commissioned to undertake a Winter Bird Habitat Assessment for the Hallgates to Elms Farm water pipeline project to the northwest of Leicester. - The Winter Bird Habitat Assessment was undertaken to determine the suitability of the land through which the pipeline is proposed to pass for wintering birds, particularly those potentially associated with protected sites and also those of conservation concern. - The assessment informs the decision as to whether further winter bird surveys will be necessary at this site in winter 2024 to 2025 to support the pipeline works.
Methods	- Desk based records of birds were obtained for the area from publicly available online sources. - A site visit was undertaken to inform the assessment on the 23rd and 24th September 2024. This was carried out from publicly accessible land and rights of way over a two-day period. - All land within 500m of the proposed route of the pipeline was scanned using binoculars and a range of habitat features relevant to suitability for wintering birds recorded. Any waders, wildfowl or raptors or flocks of other notable bird species were also recorded and mapped.
Assessment	- The majority of land within the site was determined to be of low suitability for wintering birds. This was due to a lack of open sightlines, small field sizes, trees, overhead lines and disturbance from main roads reducing suitability for wintering waders and wildfowl. - Various fields within the site such as stubble fields are suitable for some flocks of small passerine species including notable species such as linnet and skylark, however narrow field margins limit suitability. - Cropston Reservoir is of value for wintering birds, supporting good numbers of waterbird species such as great crested grebe and cormorant. The adjacent fields to the south and east of this area are of moderate suitability for wintering birds
Recommendations	- It is recommended that if the route option closest to Cropston Reservoir is taken forward, further winter bird surveys of the reservoir and nearby land within 500m of the proposed route to the south and east of the reservoir is carried out. - It is recommended that at least one visit per month is carried out between October and March, with an additional nocturnal survey visit undertaken in mid-winter. - Surveys will focus on recording waterbird distribution on Cropston Reservoir, as well as usage of nearby fields by waders, wildfowl, raptors and other notable species.

This Executive Summary is not a substitute for the full report. Refer to the full text of this report for further detail.

1.0 Introduction

Background

- 1.1 TEP was commissioned to undertake a Winter Bird Habitat Assessment for the Hallgates to Elms Farm water pipeline project to the northwest of Leicester. The Winter Bird Habitat Assessment was undertaken to determine the suitability of the land through which the pipeline is proposed to pass for wintering birds, particularly those potentially associated with protected sites and also those bird species of conservation concern.
- 1.2 The assessment will inform the decision as to whether further winter bird surveys will be necessary at this site to support the pipeline works, and the specifications for any necessary winter bird surveys.

Site Overview

- 1.3 The proposed pipeline route is approximately 13 km in length and is located between Bradgate Park, near Cropston (approximate grid reference SK 53423 11450) and fields to the west of the A46 road near Groby (approximate grid reference SK 52651 05979) (Figure 1).

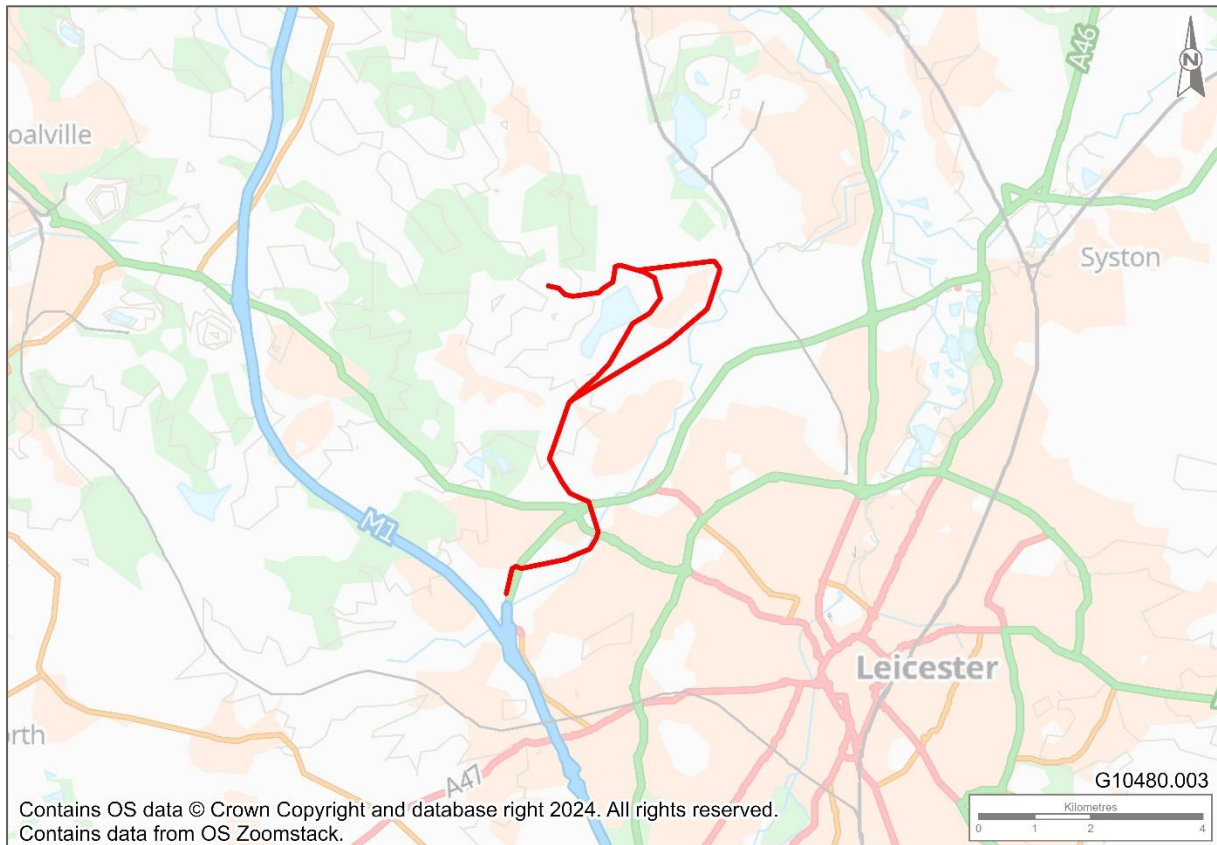


Figure 1: Site location and local context

Site Proposals

- 1.4 The proposals are for the laying of 13km of 1000mm nb trunk main from the existing Hallgates DSR complex to Elms Farm DBS.

2.0 Methods

Desktop Survey

2.1 Information was gathered regarding protected sites and bird species within influencing distance of the proposed development site. The sources used are listed below:

- Magic Map - locations of protected sites
- WeBS Report Online (Woodward et al., 2023¹) – bird records
- Leicestershire and Rutland Ornithological Society – bird records

Winter Bird Habitat Assessment Site Visit

2.2 A winter bird habitat assessment was undertaken on 23rd and 24th September 2024 by TEP Ornithologist Dr Mike Walker MCIEEM.

2.3 During the habitat assessment the ecologist walked over habitats located within the development corridor using Public Rights of Way, roads and other publicly accessible areas, and viewed all land within at least 500m of the proposed pipeline route. Due to the proximity to Bradgate Park and Cropston Reservoir SSSI, which is partly designated for the waterbirds it supports, the survey paid special attention to suitability for waders, wildfowl and other waterbirds within influencing distance of the works. The assessment also determined the potential of the site to support raptors and groups of other notable bird species.

2.4 During the survey all waders, wildfowl, waterbirds and raptors were recorded, as well as groups of other notable bird species, such as Birds of Conservation Concern².

¹ Woodward, I.D., Calbrade, N.A., Birtles, A., Feather, G.A., Peck, K., Wotton, S.R., Shaw, J.M., Balmer, D.E. and Frost, T.M. 2024. Waterbirds in the UK 2022/23: The Wetland Bird Survey and Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme. BTO/RSPB/JNCC/NatureScot. Thetford.

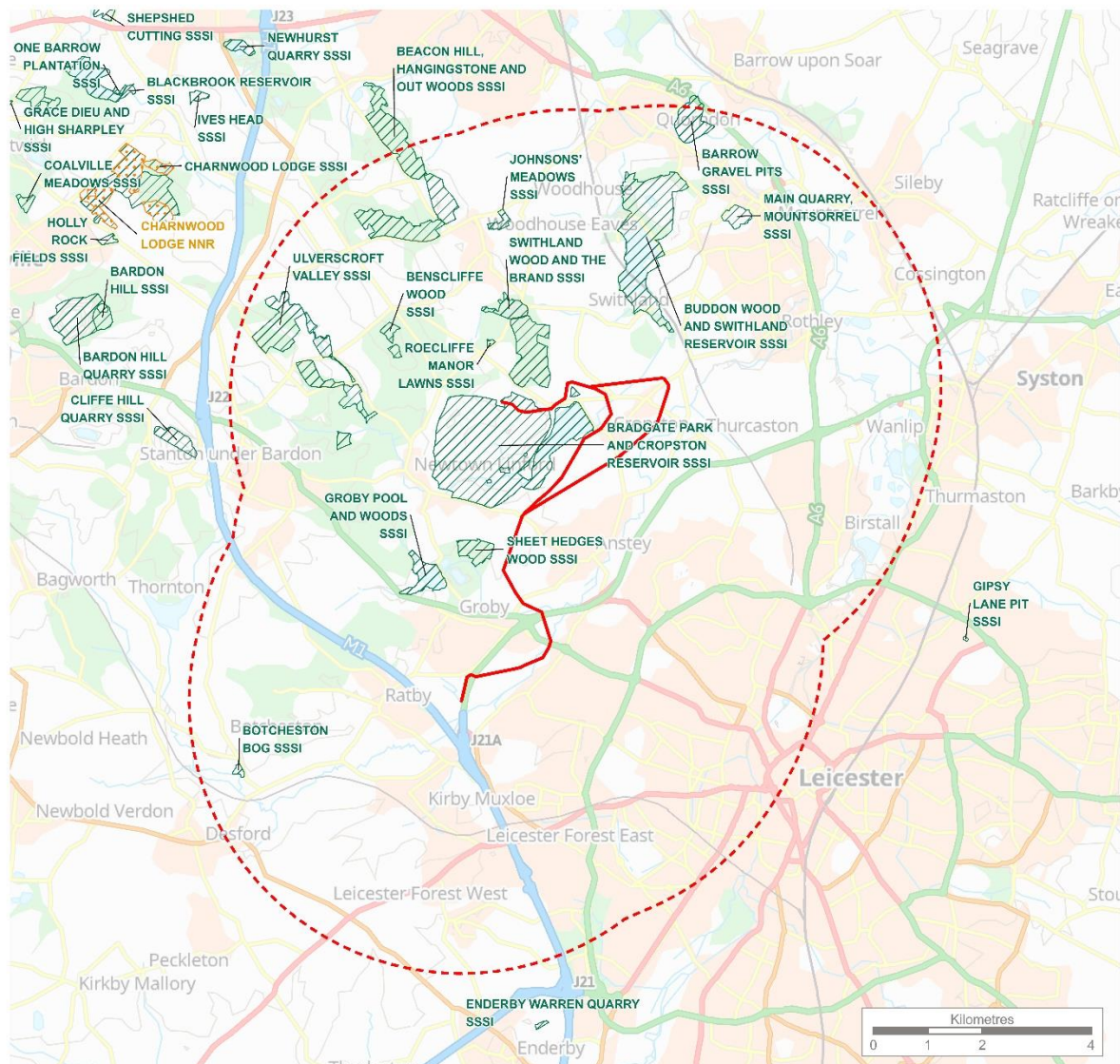
² Stanbury, A., Eaton, M., Aebischer, N., Balmer, D., Brown, A., Douse, A., Lindley, P., McCulloch, N., Noble, D., Win, I., 2021. The status of our bird populations: the fifth Birds of Conservation Concern in the United Kingdom, Channel Islands and Isle of Man and second IUCN Red List assessment of extinction risk for Great Britain. British Birds, 114, pp.723 -747.

3.0 Results

Desktop Survey

Internationally and Nationally Designated Sites

- 3.1 There are no internationally designated sites within 10km of the proposed pipeline route.
- 3.2 There are 12 SSSI sites within 5km of the proposed pipeline route (illustrated at Figure 2), including:
- Beacon Hill, Hangingstone and Out Woods SSSI
 - Groby Pool and Woods SSSI
 - Buddon Wood and Swithland Reservoir SSSI
 - Main Quarry, Mountsorrel SSSI
 - Botcheston Bog SSSI
 - Sheet Hedges Wood SSSI
 - Roecliffe Manor Lawns SSSI
 - Johnson's Meadow SSSI
 - Benscliffe Wood SSSI
 - Bradgate Park and Cropston Reservoir SSSI
 - Swithland Wood and The Brand SSSI
 - Ulverscroft Valley SSSI



Key

- Pipeline route
- - - Pipeline route - 5km buffer
- National Nature Reserve (NNR)
- Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)

Sites searched for were as follows:
 - Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)
 - National Nature Reserve (NNR)
 - Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)



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Project:
STW Hallgates to Elms Farm Pipeline

Title:
Nationally Designated Sites Within a 5km Buffer

Drawing Number:
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Figure 2: Nationally designated sites within 5km of proposed route

- 3.3 Beacon Hill, Hangingstone and Out Woods SSSI lists breeding birds on the citation, including tree pipit, grasshopper warbler, redstart, cuckoo, green woodpecker, lesser spotted woodpecker, whitethroat and tawny owl. No wintering birds are listed.
- 3.4 The citation for Groby Pool and Woods SSSI states that ‘additional interest is provided by the numbers of wintering wildfowl which utilise the site’.
- 3.5 Buddon Wood and Swithland Reservoir SSSI is stated by the citation to be an important roosting and feeding area for waterfowl during winter months. Amongst the species regularly found are goldeneye, wigeon, teal, shoveler and gadwall. Less frequent visitors include scaup and red breasted merganser.
- 3.6 Main Quarry, Mountsorrel SSSI is designated for geological features only and is not designated for any ecological reason.
- 3.7 Botcheston Bog SSSI, Sheet Hedges Wood SSSI, Roecliffe Manor Lawns SSSI are designated for habitats and plant/fungi species only. Birds are not listed on the citations.
- 3.8 Johnson’s Meadow SSSI is designated for the species rich grassland it supports, the only mention of birds on the citation is to say that the ‘hedgerows provide valuable nesting, feeding and sheltering habitat for birds, mammals, herptiles and invertebrates’.
- 3.9 Benscliffe Wood SSSI is designated for the lichens it supports. Birds are not listed on the citation.
- 3.10 The citation for Bradgate Park and Cropston Reservoir SSSI states that ‘The Park supports a good variety of breeding birds including woodcock, sparrowhawk, barn owl, whinchat, redstart, tree pipit and 3 species of woodpecker’. It also states that ‘A variety of birds breed around the Reservoir margins including great-crested grebe, teal, mute swan and occasionally little-ringed plover and gadwall’. Wintering birds are not mentioned on the citation.
- 3.11 Swithland Wood and The Brand SSSI is designated for its woodland habitats. The citation also states that ‘The wood is also of value for the diversity of its breeding bird community’.
- 3.12 Ulverscroft Valley SSSI is designated for its woodland and grassland habitats. The citation states that ‘snipe and woodcock breed regularly, yellow wagtail does so from time to time, and redstart has been known in the woodland’.
- 3.13 Therefore the only two SSSIs designated for winter bird interest are Buddon Wood and Swithland Reservoir SSSI and Groby Pool and Woods SSSI and these are located 1.1km north of the northern section and 1.1km west of the central section of the proposed pipeline route respectively.

Local Wildlife Sites

- 3.14 There are no Local Wildlife Sites within 2km of the site that are designated for their winter bird interest.

Species Records

Cropston Reservoir

- 3.15 Cropston Reservoir is a Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) core count site and annual WeBS count data is available for this location since 1960³. Cropston Reservoir is located within 50m of west of the north western option for the pipeline route.
- 3.16 A total of 37 waterbird species have been recorded by the WeBS at Cropston Reservoir in the last 5 years. The most abundant species recorded are black headed gull (5-year peak mean 18/19-22/23: 250 individuals), greylag goose (185 individuals), Canada goose (92 individuals), lesser black-backed gull (80 individuals), cormorant (80 individuals), herring gull (41 individuals) and mallard (36 individuals).
- 3.17 A particularly large count of cormorant was recorded on the reservoir in 2020/21 when 181 individuals were recorded.
- 3.18 Significant numbers of great crested grebe (5-year peak mean 18/19-22/23: 33 individuals with a peak count of 39 individuals recorded in 2021/22) have also been recorded on the reservoir.
- 3.19 Wader species regularly recorded include lapwing (5-year peak mean 18/19-22/23: 30 individuals) and snipe (2 individuals). A single common sandpiper has been recorded at the reservoir during the last two winter periods.
- 3.20 Other wildfowl species regularly recorded include wigeon (5-year peak mean 18/19-22/23: 15 individuals), teal (15 individuals), gadwall (13 individuals) and tufted duck (7 individuals).
- 3.21 Egret species have been increasingly recorded at the reservoir over the last three years with a peak count of 18 little egret in 2020/21 and three great white egret in 2021/22.

³ Contains Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) data from Waterbirds in the UK 2022/23 © copyright and database right 2024. WeBS is a partnership jointly funded by the BTO, RSPB and JNCC, with fieldwork conducted by volunteers and previous support from WWT."

- 3.22 No species have been recorded at the reservoir in numbers of international or national importance. However, 39 great crested grebe is equivalent to 23% of the national importance threshold for this species and 181 cormorant is equivalent to 29% of the national importance threshold for this species.
- 3.23 During the Winter Bird Habitat Assessment in September 2024, counts of the following species were recorded on Cropston Reservoir:
- Herring gull: 40
 - Black-headed gull: 30
 - Lesser black-backed gull: 20
 - Great crested grebe: 24
 - Cormorant: 17
 - Mute swan: 8
 - Teal: 6
 - Mallard: 5
 - Little egret: 4
 - Great white egret: 1

Groby Pool

- 3.24 Groby Pool is also a WeBS core count site and annual WeBS count data is available for this location since 1960. Groby Pool is located approximately 1km west of the proposed pipeline route.
- 3.25 Black-headed gull are again the species recorded at this location in largest numbers with a 5-year peak mean of 332 individuals recorded (2018/19 – 2022/23).
- 3.26 Wildfowl regularly recorded in the last 5 years include mallard (5-year peak mean 18/19-22/23: 63 individuals), wigeon (54 individuals), greylag goose (50 individuals), pochard (41 individuals), tufted duck (40 individuals), gadwall (35 individuals), mute swan (31 individuals), Canada goose (27 individuals), teal (10 individuals), shoveler (7 individuals), little grebe (7 individuals) and great crested grebe (6 individuals).
- 3.27 Higher peak counts included 122 wigeon (2020/21), 58 pochard (2019/20), 54 tufted duck (2021/22) and 76 gadwall (2022/23).
- 3.28 The pool is also used by moderate numbers of grey heron (5-year peak mean 18/19-22/23: 13 individuals).
- 3.29 No species have been recorded at the reservoir in numbers of international or national importance. However, 58 pochard is equivalent to 25% of the national importance threshold for this species and 76 gadwall is equivalent to 25% of the national importance threshold for this species.

Other notable bird species records along the proposed route

- 3.30 Raptor species recorded during the 2024 Winter Bird Habitat Assessment site visit included a peregrine in the farmland to the north of Groby, to the east of Groby Pool near to the existing windfarm. A sparrowhawk was also recorded in this area. Low numbers of buzzard were scattered throughout the farmland within the survey area.
- 3.31 No wader species were recorded within the survey area during the 2024 Winter Bird Habitat Assessment site visit.
- 3.32 Small flocks of Birds of Conservation Concern species including linnet and skylark were noted in the farmland in a few locations. Some small groups of mallard were recorded on small pools and watercourses.

Winter Bird Habitat Assessment

- 3.33 To aid description of the proposed pipeline route, it has been divided into four sections within this report, heading from north to south:
- Section 1: Land north and west of Cropston Reservoir
 - Section 2: Reservoir Road to Bradgate Road
 - Section 3: Bradgate Road to A50
 - Section 4: A50 to M1

Section 1 –Land North and West of Cropston Reservoir

Description

- 3.34 This section contains Bradgate Country Park which is located to the west of Cropston Reservoir and also an area of farmland and woodland to the north of Reservoir Road and Roecliffe Road.
- 3.35 Bradgate Country Park is a deer park, which contains rough, deer grazed grassland and various woodland plantations. The country park is well used by the public, with a car park at the northwestern end of the reservoir with a main tarmac footpath that leads to a visitor centre and café overlooking the south end of the reservoir. The country park is crossed by multiple tracks and footpaths.
- 3.36 To the north of Roecliffe Road is an area of farmland, mainly comprising very small grazed fields, with a larger cereal field to the north of this between a tree lined footpath and Leicester Lane to the northeast. Woodland copses are present throughout this area. A small fishing lake is present in this area surrounded by willow carr and other woodland. The waterbody was largely covered by marginal and emergent vegetation.
- 3.37 Further west the land slopes up to Smithland wood, with short, improved grassland at the southern end of this.

Figure 3: Rough deer grazed grassland within Bradgate Country Park



Figure 4: Surfaced footpaths at Bradgate Country Park



Figure 5: Small fishing lake to north of Roecliffe Road.



Figure 6: Arable field south of Leicester Lane



Assessment of importance for wintering birds – Section 1

- 3.38 This section is largely covered by Bradgate Country Park, which has limited value for wintering birds such as waders and wildfowl due to the parkland landscape, with many trees and woodland stands present, as well as the abundance of people walking throughout the area. The land to the north of Cropston Reservoir is also of low suitability for winter birds due to the mainly small field sizes and abundance of woodland and tree lines throughout this area which limit sightlines.

Section 2 –Reservoir Road to Bradgate Road

Description

- 3.39 This section contains Cropston Reservoir in the north of the section, with arable land located south of this. The majority of the arable land is either cereal stubble, or arable land that has been harvested and so was bare at the time of survey. The field sizes were generally larger than elsewhere along the route and so the landscape was more open. The landscape was still rolling with some quite steeply sloping fields. Just north of Bradgate Road were a number of smaller maize fields.
- 3.40 Directly south of Cropston Reservoir was a strip of bare ground, then becoming short improved grassland further east. A tree line separating this area from the reservoir contained mixed conifer and broadleaved species. These narrow fields sloped upwards from the canal and a broad, well used surfaced footpath ran along the southern edge. A reed bunting (Section 41 bird species) was recorded in the hedgerow adjacent to the footpath.
- 3.41 South of the footpath the arable fields continued to slope upwards, before sloping down to the southeast in quite an open landscape.
- 3.42 The south eastern end of Cropston Reservoir is wooded. At the eastern end of Cropston reservoir is a dam along the top of which Reservoir Road runs, with the water works on the eastern side of this.
- 3.43 The reservoir is large and open, with woodland or trees around most of the perimeter. The water is shallower at the western end where some of the substrate is exposed. This shallow area was favoured by gulls and cormorant at the time of the survey.

Figure 7: Strip of arable land between south end of Cropston Reservoir and footpath



Figure 8: Fairly open arable landscape south of Cropston Reservoir



Figure 9: Looking north from south of section over rolling arable landscape.



Figure 10: Looking west from Reservoir Road at eastern end of Cropston Reservoir



Assessment of importance for wintering birds – Section 2

- 3.44 This section contains the most suitable habitat for waterbirds, including flocks of waders and wildfowl within the survey area. This is largely due to the presence of Cropston Reservoir which is known to support large numbers of waterbirds, but also due to the open arable landscape to the south of the reservoir with more open sightlines. These more suitable fields are located between the footpath to the south of the reservoir and Anstey to the south and are bordered to the east by Cropston Road. These fields still do not contain high levels of suitability for waders and wildfowl, as they did not seem particularly wet and the sightlines are still partly limited by very occasional trees, low hedgerows and the undulating landscape, but they are considered of moderate suitability.
- 3.45 The fields directly adjacent to the south of the reservoir could potentially be used by wader and duck species, however the suitability is limited by how narrow the fields are and the presence of a well-used footpath along the southern edge.
- 3.46 Cropston Reservoir is known to be used by large numbers of gull species as well as goose species which are not of conservation concern (Canada goose and greylag goose). However, it is known to support important numbers of species including cormorant and great crested grebe. It is unlikely that either of these species would use the surrounding landscape in significant numbers.
- 3.47 The reservoir is also known to support small numbers of lapwing and egret species including little egret and great white egret. These species could potentially use the fields in this section for feeding. Small flocks of linnet were observed to use the fields in this section and it is likely they will be used by flocks of notable small passerine species throughout the winter period.

Section 3 –Bradgate Road to A50

Description

- 3.48 This section lies between Anstey to the east and an area of woodland containing Groby Pool and other quarry and fishing lakes to the west. The land is steeply sloping in the south of this section, with a small windfarm located at the top of the slope.
- 3.49 Land use in the south of this area was largely cereal stubble with hedges and some trees at the perimeter. An area of cattle grazed improved grassland was present in the middle of this area along with some harvested arable land. The north of this section was more dominated by maize with some stubble fields present. Field sizes were quite small in this section.

- 3.50 An area of wetter grassland with about 30% rush cover was present at the south east of this section, however this was bounded on two sides by main roads, including the A50 and A46 and a large junction and was therefore heavily disturbed. A large overhead line also passed through this area.

Figure 11: Arable field with small windfarm visible in background.



Figure 12: Cattle grazed grassland in north of section.



Figure 13: Looking south from Bradgate Road towards Anstey High Leys over arable field.



Figure 14: Undulating landscape east of Sheet Hedges Wood



Assessment of importance for wintering birds – Section 3

- 3.51 The area with the greatest suitability in Section 3 for supporting groups of waders or wildfowl is located on some wetter fields at the southern end of this section, however due to the high levels of disturbance from the adjacent A46 and A50 and the large road junction it is highly unlikely that significant numbers of birds would use this location.
- 3.52 There are some stubble fields within this section that have suitability for notable wintering birds, however due to the limited sightlines available it is likely that this will be limited to small flocks of passerine species such as skylark, linnet and other finch species. Overall this section is considered to be of low suitability for wintering birds.

Section 4 –A50 to M1

Description

- 3.53 The land within the survey area at the southern end of the proposed route largely comprised relatively small fields bound by tall tree lines or hedges with trees at the perimeter. The landscape in the survey area was also dominated by the presence of the major roads within this section including the M1 and the A50 at the southern and northern extents, but also the A46 which the proposed route partly follows.
- 3.54 Land use included harvested and probably unsown arable land at the southern end, as well as a larger field dominated by tall ruderal vegetation, with thistle (*Cirsium*) species most abundant. A strip of land containing horse grazed grassland with many scattered trees and shrubs was present and to the north of this a triangular field west of the A46 contained a brassica crop. Field margins throughout are generally very narrow.
- 3.55 To the north and east of the A46 the land the rolling fields were largely arable, containing a mix of maize and cereal stubble. Just south of the A50 were a few horse grazed grassland fields.

Figure 15: Improved grassland just south of A50. Large overhead line passes through fields.



Figure 16: Bare arable field with recently flailed hedge at southern end of Section 4.



Figure 17: Maize field just east of A46



Figure 18: Field containing tall ruderal vegetation



Assessment of importance for wintering birds – Section 4

- 3.56 Due to the limited sightlines present throughout these fields caused by the tall hedgerows and treelines and undulating landscape, as well as the high levels of noise disturbance from busy main roads, this section is considered to be of low suitability for notable wintering birds. The land use present was also of limited value for wintering bird species such as waders and wildfowl.

4.0 Discussion and Recommendations

- 4.1 The findings of the winter bird habitat assessment are that much of the length of the proposed pipeline route are of low value for wintering birds, particularly waders and wildfowl, with disturbance from main roads and footpaths, a lack of open sightlines and agricultural land use of generally low suitability. There is some potential for flocks of finches and skylark, however the potential for seed eating birds is reduced due to the narrow field margins.
- 4.2 Cropston Reservoir is of value for wintering birds and is known to be used by a range of waterbird species, including good numbers of great crested grebe and cormorant. The reservoir forms part of a SSSI for which waterbirds are noted, albeit throughout the breeding period rather than the winter, however these same species will use the reservoir throughout the winter period.
- 4.3 Cropston Reservoir is well monitored for birds throughout the year by WeBS surveyors and this information is available. However, the information only relates to the whole reservoir and so distribution of bird usage throughout the reservoir is not possible from WeBS data.
- 4.4 If the route option closest to Cropston Reservoir is selected then there will be potential for disturbance of birds using Cropston Reservoir. The potential for disturbance to occur will be limited by the topography of the land adjacent to the reservoir which slopes up on the southern side and then slopes down again in the far side of a ridge. The trees that line much of the reservoir will also limit impacts of disturbance and birds present will be habituated to some level of human disturbance due to the nearby busy footpaths and the visitor centre and café. However noisy works could still result in potential displacement of waterbirds if they use the areas of the reservoir closest to the works in significant numbers.
- 4.5 The farmland adjacent to the south of Cropston Reservoir in Section 2 through which the proposed route passes is also considered of moderate suitability for wintering birds such as waders and wildfowl due to its increased openness and more favourable land use (mainly stubble).
- 4.6 It is recommended that if the route option closest to Cropston Reservoir is selected, that further winter bird surveys are undertaken at the reservoir and of open fields within 500m of the pipeline route within the land immediately southeast of the reservoir where the field size is larger and the landscape more open. These more suitable fields are located between the footpath to the south of the reservoir and Anstey to the south and are bordered to the east by Cropston Road.

- 4.7 It is recommended that the surveys are undertaken at a frequency of at least one survey visit per month and that the winter period between October and March should be covered. The surveys should aim to achieve a good understanding of the distribution of bird usage across the reservoir, to understand how birds use the closest areas of the reservoir to the proposed works. It is recommended that a transect is undertaken throughout the nearby fields during each visit to map any bird usage of these fields including waders, wildfowl, raptors and other notable species including Birds of Conservation Concern.
- 4.8 There is potential for wintering birds to use the area differently at nighttime, including roosting and utilising different nighttime feeding locations. It is therefore recommended that at least one nocturnal survey visit is undertaken. This should be in addition to the monthly daytime visits and it is recommended that it is undertaken in January when most overwintering birds are likely to be present.

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