



PROTECTED SPECIES SURVEYS – KNOWING WHAT YOU’VE GOT

By Kelly Harmar

Golf courses are an incredibly valuable ecological resource which often provide homes for our most threatened species. Management of such rich wildlife habitat brings responsibility and though good environmental stewardship is often second nature to many greenkeepers, some environmental protection is actively enforced.

The UK has a suite of laws designed to protect our most rare and endangered species. Some of these species are well known, such as great crested newt and natterjack toads, but others have received less attention. Did you know for example that all wild birds are protected by law and that to disturb badgers on your course requires a licence from Defra? And its not just animals that are protected. It is illegal to pick or uproot protected plants such as lizard orchids, fen orchids, early gentian or Deptford pink and many rare fungi and lichens are also protected.

Protected species legislation became much stronger in 2007, following important amendments to the Habitats Regulations. The Habitats Regulations came into force in 1994 and are the UK’s interpretation of the European Habitats Directive.

However, the UK version was deemed too lenient by the European Commission who asked for changes to be made. The amendments have increased fines to £5,000 per offence (so that’s £5,000 per bat or newt or £5,000 per dormouse harmed or killed or each fen orchid destroyed!) and serious offences

can result in up to six months in prison. The amendments also remove the ‘incidental result’ defence, i.e. that offences committed unknowingly, and as and incidental result of a lawful management activity, were excused.

Put simply, ignorance is no longer an excuse.

In addition, from April 6 this year, under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, it is now illegal to kill or injure water voles in England. Previously only the water vole’s habitat had been protected. Similar protection is expected in the rest of the UK soon. UK water vole populations have declined by 90% since 1990 and this legislation is long overdue.

One of the main ways of staying above the law is to know what you have on your golf course. If you know you have protected species then you can take steps to avoid disturbing or harming them.

Surveys of protected species should be carried out by approved surveyors who are licensed, by the statutory conservation body relevant to your country, to survey and handle protected species and can recognise signs of their presence: e.g. the folded leaves created by great crested newts to protect their eggs or the feeding platforms constructed by water voles.

Site surveys will map the location of protected species and their favoured habitat and will help plan future management, directing damaging activity away from sensitive areas. Equally, for specific operations, a survey can



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also prove that protected species are not present in the location you are interested in and this will allow you to proceed with management without restriction.

However, if you have protected species on your site then that need not mean that the work can't go ahead, it will just need to be thought through more carefully and appropriate measures put into place.

For example, this year's Open is to be held at Royal Birkdale, one of the most ecologically sensitive golf courses in the UK. Royal Birkdale is a Special Area of Conservation (SAC), the highest level of environmental protection within the European Union, that has both natterjack toads and sand lizards. Both are rare and protected in the UK and both are vulnerable to the thousands of trampling feet that track across the dunes during the Championship. However, surveys of the course have identified the main sensitive areas and have allowed spectator routes and infrastructure to be placed well away from these vulnerable areas and a plan is in place to protect any inquisitive lizards or toads spotted during The Open. The right information provided to the statutory bodies helped obtain a licence to host The Open.

Much more routine operations can also be planned to provide minimum disturbance. Measures as simple as choosing the correct time of year can ensure that protected species are not disturbed and that greenkeepers stay within the law. For example vegetation clearance in ponds that have great crested newts can be undertaken in the late autumn when newts leave their

breeding pools to hibernate on land and tree felling should be undertaken before the end of March before breeding birds have set up home or bats have left their hibernation chambers and begun to roost. In other circumstances the removal of mature trees on the golf course can be compensated for by providing bird and bat boxes or raised walkways can be installed across important botanical areas.

Ignorance is no longer an excuse while the right knowledge and expertise can help bring about structured and sensitive management and protect our vulnerable species.

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