

Cotswold Water Park confirmed as a Site of Special Scientific Interest

- Lakes created through gravel extraction have been a boon for birds, plants, and recreation
- Natural England's move to extend the SSSI designation to cover more than 170 lakes is now complete
- Park is a notable example of nature thriving alongside recreation and business
- Natural England will work with stakeholders to ensure these activities can all continue

Natural England has today confirmed Cotswold Water Park as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) for its rich array of waterbirds and aquatic plants.

The decision was taken by Natural England's Board at a public meeting and marks the last step in the designation process after the site was notified as a SSSI in January. Notification was followed by a 5-month consultation period to allow any interested party to make representations to Natural England.

A number of objections and representations of support were received by Natural England, all of which were considered by the Board.

Cotswold Water Park SSSI encompasses more than 170 lakes created by mining for the gravel industry which are now popular spots for leisure activities such as water-skiing, sailing, canoeing and swimming. Spread across 20 square miles on the Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, and Oxfordshire borders, the lakes have become home to around 35,000 waterbirds over the winter, including rarer species such as great crested grebe, little egret and little ringed plover.

Following the Board's decision, Tony Juniper, Chair of Natural England, said:

The manner in which wildlife has seized the opportunity presented by these man-made lakes shows that nature recovery really is within our grasp. Working with partners at this landscape scale is the key to establishing a Nature Recovery Network.

I recognise that whilst many have welcomed the designation some people have strong concerns about our decision, which reflects the complexity, scale and importance of this site. I would like to assure everyone that Natural England is committed to continuing to work with them. This is a working landscape, and indeed it is gravel extraction which is the principal reason for the creation of the interest here. We wish to see this, and all current uses of the water park – wildlife, access, recreation, mining, farming and military – continue and will put in place an agreed framework to enable this to happen.

This designation will enable the various interests of the Cotswold Water Park to be developed in a more strategic way. It gives nature a seat at the table, alongside other factors, when big decisions about land use change are made. This is about making sure that space for nature is at the heart of the site's future.

The Board met in public on 15 September 2021 to consider the notification and heard a number of representations. It adjourned the meeting for 2 weeks so that it could consider the matter in more detail. When the meeting was resumed the Board decided to confirm the SSSI designation with some minor modifications to boundaries to remove areas not meeting the high scientific threshold.

Today's decision is the culmination of 7 years of work by Natural England staff to assess the evidence for SSSI status and work with local people who have an interest in the site, including businesses, landowners and the Ministry of Defence, which operates two international air bases nearby. Natural England is committed to maintaining these important relationships and meeting the future needs of stakeholders, including a framework so that bird hazard management which is essential to air safety can continue to take place in a setting that is also of high value for nature on a landscape scale.

The first Cotswold Water Park SSSI was designated in 1994, covering just 10 lakes. Since then the area has attracted growing numbers of birds, leading to the recent expansion of the SSSI which now covers just under 2,000 hectares and is the UK's largest marl (lime-rich) lake system.

The lakes – a series of shallow and deep open waters – are also supported by a range of other habitats including sparsely-vegetated islands, gravel bars and shorelines, reedbed, marsh, wet ditches, rush pasture, semi-natural and improved grasslands and woodland. This provides valuable nesting, resting and feeding conditions for nationally important populations of birds in the breeding and non-breeding seasons.

Breeding birds in the park include scarce species such as nightingale, alongside large numbers of ducks of several species, mute swans, greylag geese, coot and herons. The scrub and reedbed are full of breeding warblers including reed, sedge and Cetti's warblers, blackcaps and willow warblers. Important aquatic plants are also found there including starry stonewort, lesser bearded stonewort and pointed stonewort.

Notes to editors

The SSSI designation means the park and its wildlife have legal protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, so that Natural England must be consulted on any new proposals that could significantly affect the wildlife interest.

As the Government's conservation adviser, Natural England has a duty to notify SSSIs when it considers that an area of land is of special interest for its flora, fauna or geological or physiographical features. Selection of

SSSIs is carried out in accordance with published guidelines and once notified, the special interest features of a SSSI are given protection against operations that are likely to damage them.

Natural England received 54 objections to the SSSI notification and a further 16 representations, 13 of which expressed support for the SSSI.

Cotswold Water Park (CWP) is a 40 square mile complex of lakes formed by gravel workings along the upper River Thames on the borders of Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, and Oxfordshire. There are 2 principal blocks of lakes: a larger one in the west centred on Ashton Keynes and a smaller eastern one centred on Fairford, with stepping-stones formed by recent workings in between.

Just 10 lakes covering 135 hectares within CWP were designated as being of Special Scientific Interest for their aquatic plants back in 1994. The park has since become of national importance for its bird and plant populations. The new designation covers 1,919 hectares and more than 170 lakes, protecting the large populations of breeding and wintering birds that live there, as well as the aquatic plants.

As wildlife declines across the country, areas such as CWP are increasingly important to ensure sustainable populations can thrive.

Recreational activities are abundant across the park, including swimming, sailing, angling, water-skiing, paddle-boarding, and windsurfing.