

Cotswold Water Park given greater protection by Natural England

- People and nature will be able to thrive side-by-side
- Park has gained national importance for its bird and plant populations

In a boost to Nature Recovery, all 177 lakes covering 2,000 hectares of the Cotswold Water Park have been given Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) status.

Gaining the status will help Natural England work with all the owners and occupiers of the Park to protect and enhance its wildlife, while they continue to live, work, run businesses, and follow leisure pursuits there.

The Park was created and continues to expand as a result of mineral mining activity across Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Oxfordshire, and is a leading example of how people and nature can thrive side by side. Such sites have been especially important during the pandemic, providing places to connect with nature and spend time outdoors.

Wildlife and recreation do not just co-exist in the Park but in many cases are inter-dependent. Land specifically managed to meet the needs of leisure users also provides invaluable habitat that encourages wildlife to flourish, such as the sailing clubs which manage marginal areas as scrub, providing an excellent habitat for breeding birds.

Breeding birds in the Park include scarce species such as little egret, little ringed plover and 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, and around 35,000 waterbirds are present over the winter.

This expanded designation also ensures that Cotswold Water Park can play a key role in the Nature Recovery Network (NRN) recently announced by Natural England. The NRN Delivery Partnership brings together representatives from over 600 organisations to drive forward the restoration of protected sites and landscapes across England, helping to provide at least 500,000 hectares of new wildlife-rich habitat. Cotswold Water Park is a key link in the Nature Recovery Network and a great example of how working with a wide range of partners allows people to enjoy sustainable recreational activities while enhancing and creating rich habitats for nature.

Marian Spain, Chief Executive of Natural England, said:

I'm delighted to announce that Natural England has granted SSSI status to the Cotswold Water Park. Places like this are ever more important in bringing people and nature together, and giving us that contact with wildlife that's so vital for our health and well-

being. This extended designation is a testament to the efforts of the many bodies and individuals who have been involved in creating and managing the Water Park over many years, and living proof that some of our most important species can thrive hand in hand with homes, business and recreational activities. Special places like this form the vital backbone of a nature recovery network.

Paul Hazel, Chairman Cotswold Water Park Trust said:

The Cotswold Water Park Trust has worked for many years with its volunteers, land and lake owners and commercial operators, to try and protect and enhance the area's wildlife and habitats. The Trust is pleased, therefore, that Natural England has now formally recognised the significance of the Cotswold Water Park's biodiversity, and in particular its importance to breeding and wintering birds.

The Trust is particularly delighted that Natural England has formally acknowledged the part played in this success by a variety of stakeholders, including mineral operators, leisure providers and the public. It is crucial that the Cotswold Water Park moves forward as a balanced and sustainable example of how wildlife and people can successfully coexist, and that the public can continue to enjoy the benefits of living in, working in, or visiting this unique area. It is vital for all those who have an interest in the Cotswold Water Park to work together; the Trust hopes that Natural England will continue to work closely with all stakeholders so that progress towards achieving this vision can continue.

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.

Cotswold Water Park (CWP) is a 40 square mile complex of 177 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 all 177 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.

The notification process:

As of 7 January 2021, the extended SSSI covering all 177 lakes has been formally notified to landowners and occupiers and other interested parties. There will be a 4-month period in which anyone can make representations or object to the notification. If all objections are resolved or none are submitted, the designation will be confirmed. If there are unresolved objections the Natural England Board will hear all of these; they must then decide whether to confirm the designation (with or without reductions). If the notification is not confirmed within 9 months of the date of notification, the notification falls.

Representations can be made via:

<https://consult.defra.gov.uk/natural-england/cotswold-water-park>.