

**ELTON RESERVOIR BASIN COUNTRY PARK WETLANDS
MANCHESTER, BOLTON & BURY CANAL VERSION A September 2022**

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1 INTRODUCTION:

1.1 The Manchester Bolton and Bury Canal is a Grade A Site of Biological Importance, which means it is of County or indeed Regional Importance for wildlife. As it isn't a working canal, it is a wildlife habitat. The survey records we have made in the last couple of years show the canal is a much more important wildlife resource than previously thought. Not one member of the wildlife community is seeking canal restoration and indeed we will vigorously oppose it. Following "Canal & River Trust Volunteers" posts on Facebook we see the canals they work on appear clouded and empty of wildlife. The policies of the Council's Unitary Development Plan are thus: EN6/1 Planning permission will not be granted for development in or in the vicinity of a designated or proposed site of national or county/regional importance (SSSI or NNR or Site of Biological Importance which has been identified as of national or county/regional importance i.e. Grade A) which would either destroy or adversely affect, either directly or indirectly, the nature conservation interest of the site, unless it can be demonstrated that other material considerations outweigh the special interest of the site). This has clearly not been demonstrated with a failed Environmental Statement. The absence of Snipe feeding records in the canal marshland strip proves that the canal is too disturbed by people on the towpath for Snipe to use it.

1.2 This report is not a complete survey. It sets out, from north to south, some of the survey results of partial surveys. **The findings add considerably to the value of the Site of Biological Importance. Here are records for plants, birds, amphibians and mammals, and some invertebrates.** Other records can be found on GMLRC database. The botany survey is very much incomplete.

1.3 The highlight of the limited botany recording are the presence in good numbers of County rarities Water Dock, Royal Fern and Brown Sedge (*Carex disticha*) and the submerged and floating water plant community present. Four *Sphagnum* Bog-moss species were recorded. The Moss Oysterling Fungus *Arrhenia acerosa* is regionally notable.

1.4 Only a few casual invertebrate records have been made whilst looking for Frog spawn. Nine species of pond mollusc were recorded, as was the Nationally Scarce Great Diving Beetle *Dytiscus circumcinctus*, which lives in larger waterbodies in this area. Greater Manchester's only record of the large blue Dumble Dor Beetle was made on the canal bank at Crowtrees, with two other records being made on Old Hall Farm. The small marshland Ground Beetle *Acupalpus dubius* is local in Northern England and its records in the NW are limited to the Lancashire-Cheshire Plain, with the exception of this find. The Water Spider is very populous here. The canal is one of a suite of Dragonfly/Damselfly breeding sites in the working Country Park, and will support those species requiring deep, richly-vegetated water, and with a tolerance of fish presence - the canal is not suitable for some species. Peter Baron a local bird, butterfly and dragonfly recorder, and natural history lecturer, who for many years compiled the annual Elton Bird Report, has in recent years, been recording the Section 41 Species of Principal Importance Small Heath Butterfly on the towpath opposite Elton Goit and next to the Dog Walking Field in the impact area. The NERC Act places a duty

on local authorities to consider the impact on this species in and of their decision making. Bury Council has ignored its presence.

2 HISTORY:

2.1 The MBB Canal was opened in the 1790s. The canal banks at Woos Nab and Old Hall contained coal mine workings in the early 1800s and coal was placed directly in the barges. Opposite the Woos Nab colliery steam cranes loaded carriages with alkaline waste lifted from barges from Nob End in Little Lever, and took it across the river on a tramway (on huge concrete and stone pillars) to dump it to create the alkaline waste mound (now a Site of Biological Importance) at Warth. Hinds Lane Wharf is next to the scaffold bridge with its own track ramp and a mooring bay opposite adjacent the site of Benny's The Farmers Arms Pub. A moss-covered part-sunken canal barge can be seen in the reedmace nearing the stone slab wall approaching the Scaffold Bridge, alongside Old Hall Farm. Bealey's Wharf, next to and just south of the Goit underpass, was the terminal for a tramway which went to Bealey's industrial estate in the late 1800s. Withins Lane was another wharf with its own trackway down to the towpath. Radcliffe Wharf was the town's gateway in the first half of the 19th Century until the railways arrived. On the canal at the south end of the Country Park are two pairs of railway bridge supports for the Radcliffe Loop Bury to Bolton alternative railwayline, and the Radcliffe to Bolton railwayline. Both of these were supplied with slots in the stonework to allowing the damming of the canal should the need arise. There are farm bridges for Old Hall/Woos Nab, Hams Farm and Withins Lane, although Hams Farm is designed for no more than livestock.

2.2 The canal is not embanked adjacent Woos Nab farm. Alongside the River Irwell the canal is embanked on the river side. Between the Irwell and Hams Farm Bridge the canal is embanked on both sides. From Hams Farm bridge to the south is largely only embanked on the eastern side. Radcliffe Wharf appears to be cut out of the landscape on both sides.

2.3 The Warden Service has 17 rubbish bags on the canal and services them regularly. There is an irregular program of litterpicking from the water area and marsh strip and the canal embankments. A huge amount of rubbish has been removed in the last 2 years.

3 HYDROLOGY:

3.1 The canal is fed by Dolly Brook which is fed from Elton reservoir which in turn is fed from three natural streams – Buckley Fold Brook (which arises in partly Higher Spen Moor), The Creek Brook, Barracks Brook (which comes from Barracks Lodge and higher), and also the Reservoir Feeder which feeds from the River Irwell at Burrs. There are fields drains which also seep into Elton Reservoir, the most notable being the one that links the three ponds on Lower Spen Moor and issues as a minor stream into the reservoir. The canal has an overflow to the River Irwell – two drains are large concrete pipes, steeply set with a more or less constant flow. The third drain is a dry rectangular overflow which is used as a passage for wildlife under the canal towpath between canal and river.

3.2 There are other inflows to the canal inside the working Country Park. The bank at Woos Nab Farm has some minor inflow. Elton Goit collects drainage from surrounding fields and Elton Reservoir but does not feed the canal, rather it passes in a pipe under the canal. Withins Brook is similarly

piped under the canal. Fields 4, 5 and 6 (and part of 11) drain into the canal in a series of trickles, open ditches and pipes. This group of damp fields is a valuable canalside habitat.

4 WILDLIFE CORRIDOR:

4.1 The canal is part of a wider Wildlife Corridor, which most certainly is not just the canal itself. The wildlife of the canal also live in the surrounding fields e.g. amphibians, Otters, water birds, and thus any development on the surrounding fields will directly have a negative impact on the Grade A Site of Biological Importance.

4.2 The value of the canal in open fields means it has open valuable, unshaded marsh and swamp margins on the west side. Any plans to plant trees alongside the canal will destroy the marshland through shading and leaf fall. The Warden Service, as part of its management agreement with the Canal & River Trust, will be starting the removal of young willow trees when workload and seasonality allow.

5 BOTANY (mostly April 2021):

5.1 Field 80 Canal Daisyfield south to Woos Nab Farm sloping bank and canal: Water-milfoil, Common Duckweed, Water Mint, Fools Water-cress, Bog Stitchwort,

Reed Sweet-grass, Soft Rush, Great Willowherb, Hemlock Water-dropwort, Himalayan Balsam, Clustered Dock, Cuckooflower, Wavy Bitter-cress, Creeping Bent, Remote Sedge, Reed Canary-grass, Lesser Celandine,

Bluebell, Field Woodrush, Hart's-tongue Fern, Hard Fern, Broad Buckler Fern, Common Male Fern, Scaly Male Fern (Da), Red Fescue, Yorkshire Fog, Common Sorrel, Cleavers, Creeping Buttercup, Giant Hogweed (cut below soil), Broad-leaved Dock, Nettle,

Bramble, Beech sapling, English Oak, Grey Willow, Silver Birch, Common Hawthorn, Tutsan, Holly, Sycamore,

Hypnum cupressiforme, Polytrichum formosum, Polytrichum commune, Pseudotaxiphyllum elegans, Calliergonella cuspidata, Plagniomnium elatum, Sphagnum fimbriatum (lots), Sphagnum palustre, Rhytidadelphus squarrosus, Brachythecium rutabulum, Atrichum undulatum, Kindbergia praelonga,

Lophocolea bidentata, Pellia epiphylla. Cladonia chlorophaea.

Otter spraints on horizontal willow next to Woos Nab. Moorhen.

5.2 Field 82/87 Canal Woos Nab Farm south to Scaffold Bridge sloping bank and canal: Canadian Waterweed, Reed Sweet-grass, Greater Reedmace, Branched Bur-reed, Common Spike-rush, Soft Rush, Reed Canary-grass, Marsh Thistle, Lady Fern, Hard Fern, Scaly Male Fern, Clustered Dock, Fringe-cups, *Sphagnum squarrosus*, Large Sycamore at end of farm by CRT bank. NB stream seepage habitat into canal south of well at Woos Nab (at old colliery). Remote Sedge, Nettle, Great Willowherb. Fringed Water-lily appeared since the dredging in front of the overflow.

Bluebell, Scaly Male Fern, Lady Fern, Soft Shield Fern at Dolly Brook lower track bridge. Sycamore, Hawthorn. Bluebell present at the boat launch area near Scaffold Bridge.

Scarlet Elf Cup Fungus. Pestle Puffball on ramp from Hinds Lane to canal.

5.3 Goit Field 98 Canal (by Old Hall Farm): Common Duckweed, Water Soldier, Fool's Water-cress, Water-forget-me-not, Greater Reedmace, Great Willowherb, Reed Sweet-grass, Hemlock Water-dropwort, Soft Rush, Sweet-flag, Marsh Thistle, Lady Fern, Mat-grass, Grey Willow, Hawthorn, Bramble, *Lophocolea bidentata*, *Sphagnum subnitens*, *Sphagnum fimbriatum*, *Calliergonella cuspidata*, *Rhytidiadelphus squarrosus*.

Mosses on the sunken barge in the canal by Elton Goit and just south of the Scaffold Bridge – *Dicranum scoparium*, *Dicranoweisia cirrata*, *Kindbergia praelonga*, *Hypnum cupressiforme*, *Polytrichum commune*, *Campylopus introflexus*. *Chondrostereum purpureum* Purple Bracket Fungus array by Hinds Lane path entrance.

5.4 Goit Field 97 Canal (Coney Green Farm) next to Coney Green's Goit : Water Dock, Water Forget-me-not, Water Soldier, Water Horsetail, Water Mint, Brown Sedge (*Carex disticha*)(3.6m wide band)(Two fence posts on towpath bank now marked with white paint bands, one at each end , to mark the location of this county rarity), Marsh Willowherb, Soft Rush, Common Marsh Bedstraw, Skullcap, Marsh Woundwort, Gipsywort, Lady Fern, Great Willowherb, Creeping Thistle. The acid grassland embankment on the goit side is described in the Elton Goit report.

5.5 Field 95 Canal Coney Green Hams Farm Bridge to Withins Lane Bridge: Water Soldier, Water Milfoil, Rigid Hornwort, Common Duckweed, Greater Reedmace, Water Horsetail, Yellow Iris, Tufted Forget-me-not, Hemlock Water-dropwort, Sweet Flag, Soft Rush, Common Marsh Bedstraw, Skullcap, Marsh Woundwort, Short-fruited Willowherb, Clustered Dock, Hairy Sedge, Common Ragwort, Mouse-eared Hawkweed, Lady Fern.

Peltigeria membranacea, Moss Oysterling Fungus *Arrhenia acerosa*, *Polytrichum piliferum*, *Calliergonella cuspidata*, *Kindbergia praelonga*.

On stone canal banking Hams Farm Bridge to Withins Lane Bridge – *Hypnum cupressiforme*, *Brachythecium rutabulum*, *Dicranoweisia cirrata*, *Ceratodon purpureus*. On Hams Farm Bridge: Wall Rue.

Withins Lane Bridge Black Spleenwort, Wall-rue. Black Spleenwort can be found on the stone wall down the sloping track to the allotment. Bluebells found along the sloping track verge.

5.6 Fields 13, 12, 11, 4 Canal at Coney Green Farm south of Withins Lane: several patches of *Sphagnum squarrosum*; 1 patch *Sphagnum fimbriatum*. Fields 4 and 12 Canal: Water Dock, Frog-bit, Great Duckweed, Common Duckweed, Ivy-leaved Duckweed, Water Soldier, Nuttall's Waterweed. Greater Reedmace, Fool's Water-cress. At Crowtrees Farm: *Aulacomnium palustre*, *Peltigera membranacea*. Towpath embankment: Amethyst Deceiver, Stump Puffball, Jelly Ear Fungus, Oyster Mushroom. Hazel, Ivy on towpath embankment. The Water Dock is carefully plotted on iRecord. The Royal Fern plants in the towpath bank stonework have been counted and plotted on iRecord. They are near the reedbed pond in particular.

Radcliffe Loop Bridge Maidenhair Spleenwort, Mouse-eared Hawkweed on grass top west side.

No record of the alien Floating Water-fern was made, though it has been known here in the past.

6 BIRDS:

6.1 The canal passes through floodplains rich in birdlife. This interest is described in the related reports. A number of bird species utilising the site are legally protected via the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (Schedule 1) and some are Priority Species termed Section 41 Species i.e. species “of principal importance for the purpose of conserving biodiversity” covered under section 41 (England) of the NERC Act (2006). These are indicated (S41) in the following list, which also provides threat categories as found in the Birds of Conservation Concern 5.

6.2 Water Rails have been recorded plentifully from Field 95 (Withins Lane Bridge) northwards. There is a single population that occupies the Elton Goit SBI and the Canal. Damage to the Elton Goit SBI directly damages the interest of the Canal Grade A Site of Biological Importance. Other birds recorded by ourselves and Harold Dickinson include Moorhen, Coot, Mallard, Teal (Amber List), Oystercatcher (Amber List), Kingfisher (W&CA Schedule 1), Lapwing (Red List), Great Crested Grebe, Mute Swan, Canada Goose, Grey Heron, Reed Bunting (Amber List), Swallow, Sand Martin, Jay, Carrion Crow, Magpie, Robin, Great Tit, Long-tailed Tit, Blue Tit, Greenfinch (Red List), Dunnock (Amber List), House Sparrow (Red List), Wren (Amber List), Chiffchaff, Bullfinch (Amber List), Skylark (Red List), Collard Dove, Woodpigeon (Amber List), Feral Pigeon, Song Thrush (Amber List), Blackbird, Sparrowhawk (Amber List), Kestrel (Amber List). Hobby (W&CA Sch1), Willow Warbler, Swift (Red List), House Martin (Red List) are added by Steven Higginbottom. He also adds Willow Tit (S41)(Red List) is observed moving in Tit flocks along canal and up hedges into adjacent habitats. Steven Higginbottom adds this: Cormorant, Little Grebe, Tufted Duck and Teal (Amber List) have been seen feeding along the canal. Greenfinch (Red List), House Sparrows (Red List) often feed and drink on the vegetation on the canal. Redwing (Amber List) seen drinking and bathing in the canal. Sedge Warbler (Amber List) and Reed Warbler feed in the reeds along the canal. Cetti’s Warbler (W&CA Sch1) nested along the canal near Benny’s Site in 2021.

6.3 The canal embankments have substantial areas of Bramble and these areas provide great wild bird nesting sites e.g. for Blackcap and Lesser Whitethroat. And the adults are able to move along the canal and into neighbouring habitats foraging to feed chicks. The canal birdlife needs the adjacent habitats

6.4 There is almost an absence of Snipe records from the canal itself. Snipe are very prone to human disturbance and, when they sense people, they take flight. The number of Snipe put up from the Goit marshland whilst surveying the canal for frogspawn – lots; the number of Snipe put up from the canal marshland whilst surveying the canal for frogspawn – zero. The towpath is too well used by people to allow Snipe to use the canal marshland strip. If there is no Goit marsh, there will be no Snipe. They will not simply be able to use the canal. But the two complement each other perfectly. Steve Higginbottom says he has seen Snipe twice in his birdwatching career come up from the canal, alongside Field 95.

7 MAMMALS RECORDED RECENTLY:

7.1 Badger (prints in Goit and pathway down canalside rush pasture Field 95), Otter (adult with baby at canal overflow), droppings, jellies down Goitside/Canal embankment, in Goit, south west corner of Goit Hill, and along Withins Brook, Fox (droppings)(sightings), Stoat, Weasel, Mink, Hedgehog bank by Irwell, Brown Rat, Wood Mouse, Bank Vole, Short-tailed Field Vole, Grey Squirrel,

Roe Deer both sides, Bats, Water Shrew (on Goitside/Canal embankment), Common Shrew (on Hams Farm Bridge), Pigmy Shrew nearby on Withins Brook downstream of Crowtrees, Brown Hare in Goit near canal.

8 AMPHIBIANS RECORDED RECENTLY:

8.1 Plenty of Frog spawn recorded, Toad spawn and adult sightings in the water and metamorphs moving away from water. Ordinary Newt larvae netted in places. Great Crested Newts breed in two waterbodies adjacent the canal – Elton Goit pool (HG5) and the Radcliffe Loop Pond (EC7), both at Coney Green. Palmate Newts are also obviously present.

Canal by Field 80: Toads seen and heard in water. Froglet from previous year.

Canal by Field 82: Toads calling in water. 10 Frog spawn near barn. 19 Frog spawn near well box.

Canal by Field 87: Toads calling in water. C51 Frog spawn blobs alongside lane and near river bank.

Canal by Goit Field 98: 10 + 3 Frog spawn alongside non-marsh pasture, with 5 Frog spawn and Toad spawn off Towpath bank. When wet area of Goit nears canal then: C50+20+2+5 Frog spawn.

Canal by Goit Field 97: North of Goit underpass c 108 blobs in two patches and oddments. Off Towpath bank 8 Frog spawn and Toad spawn opposite the Teal pool.

South of Goit underpass 20 + c50 + 5 + 10 Frog spawn blobs.

Canal by Field 95: c 20 + 5 Frog spawn + Smooth Newt. Mining Bees in canal bank.

Canal by Field 13: 8 Frog spawn

Canal by Field 12: 10 Frog spawn

Canal by Field 11: 12 Frog spawn

Canal by Field 4: 20 Frog spawn. Toadlet recorded leaving water.

Note Frogs were not spawning in Reedmace stands. There were mostly spawning in the grassy platforms created/modified/maintained by wildfowl or farm animals. Frog spawn relates to the marshy west side unless stated otherwise. Frog spawn counts or guesstimates based on counts and long experience. You can see most Frog spawn is deposited in canal alongside Elton Goit SBI.

8.2 Toads have a measure of protection in the planning system. The Common Toad is listed by the UK Government as a United Kingdom Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Species given “serious declines.” This is now succeeded by the UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework (or “Biodiversity 2020”) and Priority Species are termed Section 41 Species of Principal Importance, the “revised delivery method” for Common Toad conservation cited as “planning policies and control” (Gov.uk website). The JNCC Priority Species account also states “WIDER ACTION- PLANNING: This amphibian would benefit from recognition of its habitat and management needs at the wider landscape scale both aquatic and terrestrial. Taking account of/ or determining its presence during the early stages of local authority development plans, land allocation (particularly `brownfield sites`) and then development schemes.” Note it would be an act of professional disgrace for a County Ecologist to accept an amphibian survey for a major development without a proper assessment of Toad populations, distribution and habitat. We have not completed such a project in our work, as we are not working for developers.

9 RECREATION:

9.1 The vista that opens out when people walk from Radcliffe to Bury along the towpath and leave behind them the barrier created by Radcliffe Loop railway embankment is stunning. Canal and towpath users since the 1790s have enjoyed this sight. One can see across the wet pasture and hayfields of Coney Green farm all the way to the Rossendale Hills and Knowl Hill above Rochdale. A

series of houses and rooftops, and canalside trees built on Coney Green Farm will destroy this vista for everyone, for all time.

9.2 The canal towpath caters for all users, being active hiking/running, bike, buggy, wheelchair and walking stick -friendly. In the east the path is along Withins Lane from Bury Road to Withins Reservoir and Elton Reservoir. People wish to walk in the countryside here, not open space in the town. The canal and the working Country Park is a bird watching hotspot. This section of the towpath and Withins Lane is the route of a regular guided Walkingforhealth.org walk. END

