

**Threestoneburn Plantation
Wooler, Northumberland**

**Reptile and Amphibian
Survey 2007**

Prepared
for
Scottish Woodlands Ltd

by
E J Steele
Ornithological and Mammal Surveyor
Heathfield
Hillside East
Rothbury
Northumberland
NE65 7YG

Tel 01669 620418
Email john.rothbury@gmail.com

1 Introduction;

1.1 The Site

This former 700Ha Forestry Commission plantation lies in a broad upland basin within the eastern flank of Cheviot Hills. The site is situated at an elevation of between 300m and 714m above sea level with the majority of its aspect being north easterly on steeply sloping ground. Hedgehope Hill at 714m, the second highest hill in the Cheviot range, is located at the site's south western corner. Its high southern boundary is completed by Dunmoor Hill (569m) and Cunyan Crags (473m).

Small scale planting commenced in 1967 with the majority of the planting done in between 1971-75 followed later by peripheral planting between 1979 and 1982. The bulk of the trees planted were of Sitka Spruce with small pure and mixed stands of largely Lodgepole Pine and Japanese Larch, the latter often being planted in 15m wide edges to the Sitka blocks adjacent to rides in the central area of the site.

Extensive open areas exist within the site amounting to approximately 100Ha. These are largely confined to the high ground on the southern boundary and are of wet and dry heath communities with a small amount of blanket bog. Other smaller areas exist in the form of the river corridor of the Threestone Burn, the rides and road verges and the in-bye grazing land adjacent to Threestoneburn House. Several 1-2 Ha blocks were cleared of trees in 2002 for conservation purposes.

Three ponds and several wetland habitats have also been created on site since the planting was concluded.

Small scale planting of deciduous trees within the main river corridor was carried out in 2003.

2 Project Brief and Method

2.1 Project Brief.

To undertake a "presence or absence survey" of the reptiles and amphibians within the site boundaries with no attempt at assessing population sizes.

To assess the potential re-colonisation of species once felling is completed.

2.2 Method.

Most rides and roads were walked over 7 days (17 April, 4, 9, 14, 22, 23 May, 13 June.) and all signs of species seen to be using these open areas and the adjoining trees were noted on 1:10000 scale maps.

Sunny open areas and rides were searched carefully at distance using binoculars for basking reptiles.

All water courses, ponds and flushes were checked for occupation.

During the late evening of the 17 April and 14th May the pond edges were searched by torch light to detect amphibian activity.

3 Results

3.1 Site Survey Map

A map is appended detailing the locations of the protected species encountered.

3.1.1 Specially protected and threatened species

The following abbreviations are used in relation to legal and conservation status;

- H Listed on Annex 2 or 4 of the Habitats Directive.
- W. Protected under Schedule 5 of the *Wildlife and Countryside Act* 1981 as amended
- Wp. Partial protection in the above schedule.
- S. Listed on the *UK Steering Group* short list
- L. Listed on the *UK Steering Group* long list
- NR Rare in Northumberland

Great crested newt. (H, NR, S,W).

None were found. No previous records of this species have been recorded from the site. The nearest known site for this species is 15 km away in a lowland site. While searching for other newt species careful observations were made for signs of adults and eggs.

Grass Snake. (NR,Wp)

None were found. No previous records of this species have been recorded from the site. Historical records exist from the Wooler area and the Breamish Valley but in garden type habitats. It is very unlikely that it is present on site given its isolation.

Slow worm (L, Wp)

None were found. It is probable that slow worm is present but given its secretive nature the chances of coming across it on so few survey days is remote. Time did not allow for the use of sun trapping methods.

Viviparous lizard (Wp)

7 animals were encountered sunning themselves on vegetation in rides and open areas. This common species were widely distributed and at all elevations.

Adder (L, Wp)

3 individuals were found in sheltered open areas. This species will be under recorded given its retiring nature

Common frog (L, Wp)

5 individuals were found in a variety of wetland types. Tadpoles were present in only the middle of the three ponds. This will be a well represented species on the site away from breeding ponds.

Common toad (L, Wp)

2 individuals were found alive. One was close to the ponds but the other was almost at the summit of Hedgehope in bilberry. 3 dead individuals were found close together by the main pond, having been eaten by a predator, possibly mink. Toad tadpoles were found in large numbers near the outfall to this pond where they were being washed into the burn. This will be a common species on site.

Smooth newt (L, Wp)

Not found.

Palmate newt (L, Wp)

This species was found in 2 locations. The first was in the middle pond where 8 adults were in courtship and the other in a flooded forest drain close to the northern boundary where 3 adults were seen.

4. Evaluation of Reptile and Amphibian Interest and potential for re-colonisation.

4.1 Introduction

The plantation at present is a largely inhospitable environment for most of the species concerned. Save for the possibility of winter hibernation opportunities, all species rely on open habitats to provide food, shelter and breeding conditions.

4.2 Schedule 5 species

The plantation itself currently holds Schedule 5 species but all are only partially protected. This relates to the wellbeing of the animals themselves and not their dwelling places. The species involved are lizard, adder, frog, toad and palmate newt.

No specially protected species were located on the survey but caution must always be exercised in the unlikely event of their occurrence.

Reptiles. Both species are presently found in open areas within the plantation. In order to minimise the risk to them, forest machinery should be kept on metalled tracks as much as possible until in the felling zones.

Amphibians. The above suggestion applied to reptiles equally applies to amphibians as only a relatively short period of each year is spent in ponds and ditches. Foraging and hibernation outside the short breeding season is carried out mainly as a terrestrial activity in grassland and heath. All wetlands, ponds, water courses and ditches holding water (no matter how temporary), should be safeguarded at all times.

4.3 Potential re-colonisation of the site following felling.

4.3.1 Introduction

Prior to the acquisition of the farm by the Forest Authority in the mid 1960's the farm was treeless save for a few specimen trees near the farmhouse. Clearly, from local knowledge and the vegetation that remains unplanted, the farm had a mosaic of diverse moorland habitats including blanket bog, wet and dry heath, acidic and neutral grassland with springs, flushes and burns and some rocky outcrops. It is not improbable to suggest that many of these habitats will reappear in modified form for reptiles and amphibians to utilise. This has been the case in a nearby smaller scale reversion of plantation to moorland.

4.3.2 Potential colonists.

It is anticipated that no new colonists will appear following tree removal. The removal of trees and the restoration to open wetland habitats will enhance both existing reptile and amphibian populations eventually.

Consideration should be given to the creation of further wetland areas as the trees are removed, as this will benefit a wide spectrum of species of plants, invertebrates as well as animals.

E J Steele
16 July 2007

