



SOUTH EAST DEVON  
HABITAT REGULATIONS  
PARTNERSHIP

# South East Devon Habitat Regulations Executive Committee

## *Habitat mitigation team update*

*Wildlife Wardens and Devon Loves Dogs  
Growth, Development & Prosperity,  
East Devon District Council  
July 2025*

Legal comment/advice:

EDDC Legal Services have read through this report and have no comments of a legal nature to make.

DEM.1-0007/July2025/RAH

Finance comment/advice:

There are no direct financial implications set out in the report.

**Public Document:** Yes  
**Exemption:** None  
**Review date for release:** None

## Recommendations

It is proposed that the Executive Committee:

1. Notes the updates from, and progress made by the Wildlife Wardens and Devon Loves Dogs Project Officer.
2. Receives a further update report at their next meeting.

**Equalities impact:** Low

**Risk:** Low

The purpose of this report is to provide a regular update from the habitat mitigation delivery team. This enables the Executive Committee to maintain a good understanding of the initiatives, partnership working and day to day activities of public-facing staff. Continued and effective delivery of the Strategy and the development this enables remains of very high importance to all partners.

### **1. Wildlife Wardens: Claire Spence (full time, maternity cover), Katie Jones and Sama Euridge (job share).**

#### **1. Winter season**

1.1 Between September and March, the wardens focus is in preventing disturbance to overwintering waterbirds within the Exe Estuary Special Protection Area (SPA).

1.2 Exmouth Wildlife Refuge is the peak pressure location from September to December. The refuge is 'active' September 15<sup>th</sup> to December 31<sup>st</sup> to coincide with the arrival of migratory birds and is timed to finish when the main food source (eel grass) has been consumed.

1.3 Waterfowl are present in this area from high tide, where they rest on the water, waiting for the eel grass to come within reach. They feed from an hour after high-tide, until the water recedes around 3.5 hours after high-tide. Wading birds are always present, along the tide line, and feeding across the mud flats as the tide recedes. At peak tide, there can be several thousand birds within the refuge.

1.4 The potential for disturbance to birds at this site is high, due to the proximity to Exmouth town centre. Exmouth Wildlife Refuge, and the slipway at the adjacent Imperial Recreation Ground, is the first point of access to the estuary, and used extensively by those wanting to access the water or the shore for recreation, specifically dog walking or watersports.

1.5 Dawlish Warren National Nature Reserve (NNR) is the most important high-tide roost of the lower Exe, and the Wildlife Refuge supports thousands of birds as they rest and feed throughout the tidal cycle. The Wildlife Refuge here is active all year and at all tidal states.

1.6 Erosion of the beach by winter storms now restricts access to the end of the sand spit in the hours around high tide. This natural barrier has significantly reduced the potential of disturbance to birds as they rest in the Wildlife Refuge and on the adjacent beach, during the winter season.

1.7 Disturbance to birds by visitors with dogs is most likely to occur in the hours around low tide. Access for dogs is restricted beyond the halfway point of the beach; dogs are not permitted past Groyne 9 (with Groyne 1 being closest to the resort and Groyne 18 at the end of the sand spit). In the hours around low tide, the sea recedes some distance from the bottom of Groyne 9, increasing the potential for dog walkers to miss this cut-off point.

1.8 Scheduling: During the Winter season, Wardens plan their schedule in accordance with tide times to ensure they are present at

- Exmouth Wildlife Refuge to prevent disturbance to feeding and resting birds as the tide recedes (Sept-Dec)
- Dawlish Warren NNR at least once, and preferably twice weekly, specifically Sundays and when a spring low tide occurs in the middle of the day (this lower tide means the beach below Groyne 9 is accessible for longer)

Outside of this, the team divide their time to maintain presence at other Exe estuary nature reserves at RSPB Exminster, Powderham & Bowling Green Marsh, across the Exe estuary through boat patrols, and the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths NNR.

1.9 Engagement: The branded South East Devon Wildlife gazebo is used as a pop-up hub, with display boards used to convey the importance of habitat and species present. Literature and leaflets from project partners are displayed, including Codes of Conduct (which are activity and location specific). (Photo 1).



Photo 1. Pop-up at Exmouth Wildlife Refuge

1.10 At Exmouth Wildlife Refuge, the telescope is an excellent engagement tool, and visitors are invited to look at the birds with guided descriptions and information on each species from the wardens. This technique is very popular, and the gazebo is often busy with visitors. Wardens ask anyone entering the Wildlife Refuge to exit at the closest safe exit point, with explanation and literature offered.

1.11 Monitoring. Monitoring of bird presence in relation human activity is conducted through Vantage Point Counts at three specific locations around the Exe estuary. Birds are counted by species and any human activity noted. Data are collated to provide information on bird numbers, within the Wildlife Refuges and outside of these areas, plus bird movements around the estuary in relation to where human recreation occurs.

## **2. Breeding Bird Season**

### **East Devon Pebblebed Heaths SPA**

2.1 While officially breeding bird season runs between March 1 and July 31, many key species begin nesting earlier and should conditions allow, will continue into August or even September. During this time, wardens focus on preventing disturbance to the breeding birds of the Pebblebed Heaths SPA, many of which are ground nesting.

2.2 Wardens also act to prevent activities damaging to the heathland habitat, including tackling dog fouling, dogs not under close control, and unpermitted BBQs and campfires to prevent wildfire. Visitors are encouraged to stick to main paths, to leave areas off the path disturbance free for wildlife – it is particularly important for dog walkers to keep dogs under close control and on the path, to ensure birds are not disturbed from the nest, leaving eggs or young vulnerable.

2.3 Engagement: As detailed in 1.9-10 - The branded South East Devon Wildlife gazebo is used as a pop-up hub and erected in car parks across the Pebblebed Heaths to act as a visitor welcome and to enable Wardens to have conversations regarding appropriate behaviour on site and highlighting wildlife value.

Key messages:

- Paws on paths – and of course, people on paths too! To prevent disturbance to ground nesting birds and other wildlife during the breeding season.
- Bag it and bin it – Combatting dog fouling. Heathland is naturally low nutrient. Not picking up dog poo affects plant assemblages and has a knock-on effect across the ecosystem.
- Wildfire awareness
- Conservation and management of the landscape
- Wildlife specifics and identification

### **Dawlish Warren Special Area of Conservation (SAC)**

2.4 Visitor numbers increase dramatically to this coastal nature reserve during the spring and summer months. Warden presence is required to ensure dogs are kept on lead during the appropriate sections of the nature reserve and do not proceed beyond Groyne 9 on the beach.

2.5 Key species here include sand lizard (Photo 2) (now only found here and at one other site in Devon) and nesting skylark (a red list species) – which nest on the ground at the dorsal end of the sand spit.

2.6 Landing of watercraft is permitted on the northern (estuary) side of the sand spit in 'Soft Sand Bay' in a designated Landing Zone between April 1 and Sept 4. This is a popular spot for boat owners to family picnic and Warden presence is required to remind visitors that dogs and BBQs are not permitted, due to nesting bird disturbance & wildfire risk.



Photo 2: Sand lizard, Dawlish Warren NNR. Photo credit: Phil Chambers

### 3. Warden diary of operations

#### September

3.1 An exciting start to the season at Exmouth Wildlife Refuge - on September 15<sup>th</sup> as we prepared for our first pop-up, there were already Dark-bellied Brent geese in the Refuge. On the first day, just 6, but quickly up to 70.

3.2 This is an early start to the winter season for this species – we see waders such as Curlew and Oystercatcher returning from breeding grounds as early as late July, but for as long as the Wildlife Refuge has been active, this as early as the team has seen Dark-bellied Brents.

3.3 Disturbance to birds from dogs on the foreshore was the greatest challenge we faced last year (and in many years previous). The use of A-frames reminding visitors of the Wildlife Refuge and showing a map of the boundaries, placed at the two key locations visitors enter the Refuge (via the slipway and hopping over the tidal defence wall opposite M&S car park) continue to be successful at reducing access from these points.

3.4 In continued effort, this year we have introduced three new Wildlife Refuge banners – located at the site boundaries such as the Exmouth Watersports shipping container close to the Imperial Rec slipway, Exmouth (Photo 3). They are visually easy to interpret and provide an excellent reference to identify key bird species. Positive feedback from the public received on these.



Photo 3. A new banner for Exmouth Wildlife Refuge

3.5 Pre-refuge season, I'mo refreshed the display boards, providing new and updated information on subjects we are frequently asked about, including migration routes and bird identification.

3.6 Inter-department teamwork kept operations running smoothly during staff absence, with assistance received from Julie (Devon Loves Dogs), and Fiona, Penny and Elle (Wild East Devon) stepping in to help Wardens maintain presence at Exmouth Wildlife Refuge.

3.7 As with recent previous years, people are much more aware of the dates that the Refuge is active and the need to remain out of it. Most people the team spoke to already knew about the Refuge and said how lucky they were to be able to see the birds up close from the tidal defence wall. It's great to see 6 years of positive public engagement paying off!



## October

3.8 During October, bird numbers continued to grow in Exmouth Wildlife Refuge, soon topping 1000+ Brent geese and 2000+ Wigeon. A delight to see and hear!

3.9 This season, we've seen a noticeable reduction in dog disturbance. When we introduced the Wildlife Refuge some 6 years ago, seeing dogs putting the birds to flight was a daily occurrence, now thankfully, it is unusual.

## November

3.10 Although our winter focus is the estuary, we are still frequently up on the Pebblebed Heaths. Wardens Sama and Katie hosted a visit from St Peter's Prep School Yr 6 to Devon Wildlife Trust's Bystock Nature Reserve for their Wild Woodlands topic. The variety of fallen leaves, across a spectrum of colours and species, did absolute justice to our attempts at wild art in the style of Andy Goldsworthy (shown in Photo 4 below).



Photo 4. Wild art inspired by Andy Goldsworthy

3.11 Early in the month, the Warden team attended the Countryside Management Association Conference in Okehampton. A useful and informative couple of days catching up on local projects and making new contacts. The conference included a day of field trips, Sama and Imo went to Yarner Wood to learn about the East Dartmoor Landscape Recovery project; Julie went to Plymouth to learn about outreach in the urban environmental with the National Trust and Katie went to Okehampton Camp to gain more information on the military's activities to conserve Dartmoor's habitats (Photo 5)



Photo 5. Countryside Management Association field trip

## December

3.6 The last month of the year usually marks the peak in bird numbers across the estuary, and we've been treated to a lovely variety of species visible from the shore at Exmouth Wildlife Refuge. Grey plover, Ringed plover, Dunlin, Redshank, Curlew, Oystercatcher, Turnstone, Egret, a frequent Kingfisher, and Great-crested Grebe.

3.7 A successful season of interactions, with little to no negativity towards Wardens at Exmouth Wildlife Refuge as we have reminded visitors of the importance of giving wildlife space to rest and feed undisturbed.

Stats: 20 pop-ups achieved and more than 200 interactions.

3.8 There have been no recorded disturbance events from watersports activities, which is a dramatic improvement on previous years. Due thanks to the local watersports activity centres and schools who have promoted the ethos of the Wildlife Refuge during lessons and online.

3.9 The greatest cause of disturbance this season, has been low flying aircraft, including military helicopters, small aircraft and helicopters.



3.10 Numbers of Dark-bellied Brent geese in the Wildlife Refuge have fallen slightly this month, moving to other locations on the estuary after consuming most of the eel grass here. This species won't leave for their breeding grounds in the Arctic before March but may move to feed on terrestrial grass in fields surrounding the estuary once all the eel grass on the mud flats has been consumed.

3.11 In news to celebrate, Warden Imo has now had her baby! We bid a fond farewell to Imo when she went off on maternity leave in Dec and look forward to her return to the team next Autumn (Photo 6)

## January

3.13 This month, Claire Spence joined the team as Imo's maternity cover. Claire joins us from an internship with Birdlife International in Switzerland. With excellent experience in environmental education, public outreach and bird identification, she's already hit the ground running.

3.14 Dawlish Warren NNR: With a full team and the conclusion of Exmouth Wildlife Refuge for the season, Wardens are now back at Dawlish Warren every other Sunday, when visitor pressure is at its peak. On weeks without Sunday working, tides are assessed to ensure we are present at the most valuable time.



Photo 6. Warden Imo, out on the patrol boat



Photo 7. Claire at her first Pebblebed Heaths Pop-up

3.15 Pebblebed Heaths: Wardens are performing a couple of pop-ups each week, during which we have been supporting the Devon Loves Dogs 'Thanks for Picking Up' campaign. Most dog walkers comment on how nice it is to be recognised, and it is a great conversation starter to drop in some of our other key messages as we move toward breeding bird season – a really positive campaign. We are still seeing issues with dog walkers leaving full poo bags next to the path rather than returning to bins in car parks, and the prize of a Dickie Bag offered as part of this campaign is a fantastic way to gently encourage positive behaviours to visitors. (Photo 7)

3.16 Claire attended the Friends of the Common Forum, alongside Julie (Devon Loves Dogs), where she enjoyed meeting project partners from the PHCT team and learning more about the Heath to Sea Project. She spoke to ~20 attendees and commented on how enthusiastic the friends were!

3.17 Exmouth LNR: Wardens Katie and Claire teamed up with Jon Gardner (Wild East Devon/Countryside) to rejuvenate an area next to the estuary in Exmouth. This area has developed into thick bramble scrub over several years, encouraging anti-social behaviour and rough sleeping. Works are to include scrub clearance, new fencing, and the laying of dead hedge to prevent informal access to the Wildlife Refuge. The installation of new benches and areas designated for bird watching should improve accessibility. Several members of the public stopped to say how glad they were that this project was taking place, and we had positive engagement on social media following our post about it. (Photo 8)



Photo 8. Katie & Claire at Exmouth LNR volunteer work party

3.18 RSPB Bowling Green Marsh: Sama & Claire welcomed St Peter's Prep school Yr4 on a wildlife walk from Darts Farm, with guided bird watch at the RSPB Lookout. The students were treated to views of Oystercatcher, Avocet, Curlew, Shelduck, Teal, Wigeon, Shoveler and Marsh Harrier! Many thanks to the RSPB volunteers at the Lookout who were so welcoming and helpful during this session (Photo 9)



Photo 9. Sama & Claire host school group at RSPB Bowling Green Marsh



## February

3.19 Wardens Katie & Claire attended the Exe Estuary Management Partnership Winter Forum, with this year's focus on flood prevention and presentations on how this is managed from national to local level. It was a great opportunity to engage with river users and meet project partners.

3.20 This month we welcomed Millie Critchley to the team – Millie is studying and NVQ in Land and Wildlife at Bicton College and we are providing her with a volunteer work placement. Millie has already bought her enthusiasm to several heath pop-ups and joined us at Dawlish Warren NNR (Photo 10)

Quick month stats: Wardens achieved 6 pop-ups on the Pebblebed Heath this month with close to 180 interactions recorded on site since the beginning of the year.



Photo 10. Bicton student Millie Critchley joins the team at Dawlish Warren NNR

## March



Photo 11. Wider team attends Devon Local Nature Partnership conference.

3.21 Wardens Katie and Claire gave a talk at Bicton College to Level 2 Countryside and Wildlife Management students, who were very engaged and asked lots of pertinent questions.

3.22 The team attended Devon Local Nature Partnership conference (Photo 11) – a valuable experience in understanding more about local nature recovery and an opportunity to connect with local ecologists and environmental partners.

3.23 Wardens Claire & Sama visited Marpool Primary School, Exmouth to give a lesson on local nature reserves, special species and appropriate behaviour to the Year 4s.

Quick month stats: Four heath pop-ups, 2 walking patrols, 4 visits to Dawlish Warren NNR

## April

3.24 Claire led on implementing a new recording system for engagements and interactions – so the team now have a simple and uniform way of recording numbers of visitors spoken to, and how many involved bylaw infringement or disturbance events.

Month stats: 5 heath pop-ups, 5 heath walking patrols, 2 boat patrols, 7 visits to Dawlish Warren across the month & 266 interactions logged since we began recording in 2<sup>nd</sup> week of April.

## May

3.25 Partnership working with the Exe Estuary Management Partnership on delivery of school sessions at Exmouth Wildlife Refuge & LNR has commenced – Wardens will be delivering sessions over the summer as an opportunity to incorporate our messaging to visiting school groups.

3.26 The team attended the Mitigation Conference in Portsmouth – a great opportunity to build and reaffirm relationships with other habitat mitigation teams working around the UK. Wardens attended workshops on the psychology of behaviour change, social media campaigns, how to engage with watersports users, and education and outreach.

3.27 Claire attended a busy Budleigh Gala day with the gazebo. On the edge of the Pebblebeds SPA this was an excellent outreach opportunity.

Quick stats: Six Dawlish Warren visits, 6 boat patrols, 5 heath pop-ups and 6 walking patrols - 467 interactions total including two busy bank holiday weekends.

## June

3.28 The team is still working hard on the water, with more boat patrols and focus on the tender. At the time of writing, we've already achieved: 4 heaths pop-ups, 2 walking patrols and 4 visits to Dawlish Warren NNR.

3.29 Planning and finalising the schedule for Heath Week is now well underway! Heath Week is an annual event celebrating the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths and the wildlife it supports. A partnership between South East Devon Wildlife, RSPB, Devon Wildlife Trust and the Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust – ranger and engagement teams come together to provide a week's worth of free (or as close as we can get to it!) activities, open to everyone.



Photo 12. Warden Claire with SED Wildlife display boards



#### **4. Devon Loves Dogs: Project Officer Julie Owen**

4.1 At the start of 2025 my working hours increased from 2.5 to 4 days a week, this has made a really big difference to what I can provide and as a result I've run a total of 24 Waggy Walks since October. In addition to my regular walk locations, I've also been able to add some new dog walking areas including Parke near Bovey Tracey and a lovely estuary walk from A la Ronde in Exmouth.

4.2 We were also invited to take a group to the new community forest at Danes Wood on the Killerton Estate, all with our partners at the National Trust. I was delighted to run our first ever guided walk at Dawlish Warren National Nature Reserve with Teignbridge District Council Ranger Phoebe. We visited in May when the spring flowers were looking beautiful.



Photo 13. Waggy Walk at Danes Wood, Killerton

4.3 My main work during the winter was focussed on our Bag It and Bin It campaign, launched just before Christmas. I worked with the Wildlife Wardens and our partners to promote the importance of picking up and removing dog waste, wherever you are. The campaign included large banners across our protected sites, information postcards and a competition to win a Devon Loves Dogs Dickie Bag – a purpose designed, smell proof, dog waste carrier.



Photo 14. Bag it and Bin it campaign banner.

4.4 The campaign was successful, we gave out approximately 300 postcards, we had over 360 entries over 3 months for the competition and we gained an additional 246 newsletter subscribers. The campaign also helped to raise the profile of DLD in the wider community, and we hope to run the campaign again, across more sites later this year.

4.5 I've been out with the gazebo and mobile display at a range of different locations across the Pebblebed Heaths, at Dawlish Warren and on the Exe Estuary. During a couple of these I linked up with our partners at Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust (PHCT) and a local trainer and behaviourist, Dawn Spence of "Pawsitive Canine" to promote the canine sport of Canicross. This activity involves the dog and owner being harnessed together so that both parties can run/jog or walk. Canicross encourages exercise, teamwork and improves communication and it's a great way of exercising your dog in the countryside on lead.



Photo 14. Canicross

4.6 During March, other officers in the habitat mitigation team and I gave presentations to Marian Spain, Chief Executive of Natural England about the work of DLD and attended the Devon Local Nature Partnership conference. I also presented to the Pebblebed Commercial Dog Walkers at their Annual Forum.

4.7 During April I did some filming on the Pebblebed Heaths with BBC Spotlight to promote our guided Waggy Walks and I also attended Woodbury Parish Council AGM with the DLD display. A bit further afield in the New Forest National Park, I attended an interesting seminar and site visit with SCCAMP (Southern Counties Canine Access Management Partnership) and it was great to see that this network of similar projects is growing steadily. It's a great source of topical information and ideal for sharing best practise.

4.8 During May I attended Haldon Forest Bark, a fantastic dog walking event hosted by Forestry England, with lots of opportunities to share our messages and work alongside other landowners and managers. Unfortunately Turn the Tide Dawlish had to be postponed due to some wild weather, but I did attend a celebration of National Nature Reserves Week with the PHCT on the Otter Estuary in Budleigh Salterton.

4.9 Most of our team travelled to Portsmouth in May for a fascinating day of workshops with our mitigation colleagues from across the Southern parts of the UK (and wider). Titled "Mitigation Meet-Up", there were representatives from Natural England, Bird Aware Solent,

Thames Basin Heaths, the Wildlife Trusts, Local Authorities and environmental consultants. It was an inspirational day of talks, discussion and peer reviews.

4.10 During June I was able to give an interview on Devon Air Radio about the work of Devon Loves Dogs. Finally, due to increased funding, I'm delighted that we're currently recruiting for the post of Assistant Project Officer for Devon Loves Dogs. We've had a significant amount of interest in this role and I'm looking forward to expanding our team and being able to continue to grow and develop the work of this project.

**Natural England comment:**

NE have reviewed the report and have no comment to make.