

Trevor James, former head of Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre, now Herts Ecology

Peter,

Chris alerted me to this – which got buried in the inbox following our return..Very sorry.

In brief:

The Commons fen in particular, and the water source that supports it, are a highly important site. It is one of the very few remaining poor-fen (a botanical term) communities in the County, and is rich both botanically and for a wide range of other groups. Invertebrates are under-studied, but this sort of place is likely to be highly important for them.

The habitat is vulnerable. It depends on its continued water supply being unpolluted, and on limited surface damage or disturbance. It also depends on being maintained as open habitat. Anything which is going to bring more human access pressures than are already on the site is a potential threat and the eastern boundary is vulnerable to access (probably more so than the western one, as it is entirely open to the neighbouring fields).

An important issue is the continuity of habitat with surrounding areas. While the site is likely to remain open to The Commons Wood itself, the proposals you have shown me would effectively isolate the site from the currently undisturbed eastern side, and nearby habitats (such as the stream running down the valley to the east). It is also a fact that the Commons Wood itself is already cut off from adjoining open landscape by a well-used golf course and a busy road, so effectively, The Commons NR would, with the wood, become an island. This would be detrimental to any species that need to connect with other populations, especially mammals, reptiles, amphibians and some insects.

Looking at other areas being proposed for development – it is apparent that similar isolation would occur for Rolls & Blackthorn Woods, but these are of less importance (although still locally valuable) than Commons NR, because they are standard central Herts ancient woodlands.

My suggestion for a compromise would therefore be to allow the proposed development of the land east of Rolls & Blackthorn Wood, but to oppose outright the development south and south-west of the Commons as it stands, except perhaps for the area proposed adjoining the A414 to the south (although I can't imagine WHDC wanting an isolated estate in the middle of the countryside down there without the developments by the Commons).

I can see why they have left out the land in between the two areas – it is the back-filled Holwell Hyde tip! It would be far too dangerous at present to try and suggest building on it, although I would imagine, in time, this may be feasible (but who would want to live on it?!).

I hope this helps.

If a statement is needed in detail about the known botanical importance of the Commons fen, I can supply it, but probably not in time for the meeting.

You can quote me directly from any of the above.

All the best,

Trevor