

**COUNTY:** HEREFORD AND WORCESTER/ File Ref: SO55/4  
GLOUCESTERSHIRE/MONMOUTHSHIRE/POWYS

**SITE NAME:** RIVER WYE (LOWER WYE)  
AFON GWY (GWY ISAF) SDdGA

**STATUS:** Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) notified under Section 28 of the  
Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, as amended.

**LOCAL PLANNING AUTHORITIES:**

Hereford and Worcester County Council	Gloucestershire County Council
Powys County Council	Monmouthshire County Council
Leominster District Council	South Herefordshire District Council
Forest of Dean District Council	Hereford City Council

**NATIONAL GRID REFERENCES:** ST544912 - SO230429

**Area:**

England: 1159.6 ha  
Wales: 245.2 ha  
Total: 1404.8 ha 157 km

**ORDNANCE SURVEY SHEETS:**

1 : 50, 000: 148, 149, 162

1 : 10, 000:	SO63SW	ST59SW, NW	SO51SW, NW, SE, NE	SO43NE, NW
	SO62NW	SO53SE, NE, NW	SO50SW, NW	SO34SE, SW
	SO61NW	SO52SE, NE, NW	SO44SE, SW	SO24NE, NW, SW

**DATE NOTIFIED (UNDER 1949 ACT):** November 1978

**DATE NOTIFIED (UNDER THE 1981 ACT):** November 1996

**Other information**

The River Wye is listed in 'A Nature Conservation Review' edited by D A Ratcliffe (1977), Cambridge University Press.

The site supports the following species and habitats covered by Council Directive 92/43/EEC on the Conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Fauna and Flora :

Allis shad <i>Alosa alosa</i>	Annex IIa, Va;
Twaite shad <i>Alosa fallax</i>	Annex IIa, Va;
Sea lamprey <i>Petromyzon marinus</i>	Annex IIa
Brook lamprey <i>Lampetra planeri</i>	Annex IIa
River lamprey <i>Lampetra fluviatilis</i>	Annex IIa, Va;
Atlantic salmon <i>Salmo salar</i>	Annex IIa, Va;
Bullhead <i>Cottus gobio</i>	Annex IIa
Grayling <i>Thymallus thymallus</i>	Annex Va;
Common otter <i>Lutra lutra</i>	Annex IIa, IVa;

Atlantic stream crayfish <i>Austropotamobius pallipes</i>	Annex IIa, Va;
Freshwater pearl mussel <i>Margaritifera margaritifera</i>	Annex IIa, IVa;
Floating vegetation of <i>Ranunculus</i> of plane and sub-mountainous rivers	Annex I

Common otter, Atlantic stream crayfish and freshwater pearl mussel are also listed under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, as amended.

The River Wye (Lower Wye) SSSI has been designated as a salmonid fishery under the EC Freshwater Fish Directive 78/659/EC. Part of the SSSI falls within the Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Within Powys the river lies within the Radnorshire Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA).

The River Wye (Lower Wye) abuts the following SSSIs in England and Wales: the River Wye (Upper Wye); the River Lugg; Monnington Scar; the Upper Wye Gorge; Shorn Cliff and Caswell Woods; the Lower Wye Gorge; Pennsylvania Fields; Livox Wood; Pierce, Alcove and Piercefield Woods; Blackcliff-Wyndcliff and the Severn Estuary.

## **Description and Reasons for Notification**

### **River Wye**

Together the River Wye (Lower Wye) and the River Wye (Upper Wye) SSSIs and several of their tributaries represent a large, linear ecosystem which acts as an important wildlife corridor, an essential migration route, and a key breeding area for many nationally and internationally important species. The Wye is of special interest for its associated plant and animal communities. Its character spans a range of types from an upland base-poor stream to an estuarine, silty lowland river. The river's overall diversity is a product of its underlying geology, soil type, adjacent land use and near natural fluvio-geomorphological regime.

The River Wye forms one of the longest, near natural rivers in England and Wales. From its source to its confluence the main channel is 250kms long, drains a catchment of 4136km<sup>2</sup> and has the fourth largest flow of any river in England and Wales. Rising at an altitude of 680m on Pumlumon Fawr in Powys the Wye meanders down through Wales, Herefordshire and Gloucestershire, finally entering the Severn Estuary at Chepstow.

### **River Wye (Lower Wye) (Hay on Wye to Chepstow)**

The River Wye (Lower Wye) is a rare example of a near natural, large western eutrophic river which, unlike many rivers of a similar type, has not been subject to significant modification from human activities. The river is of special interest for three main aquatic plant community types - rivers on sandstone, mudstone and hard limestone, clay rivers and lowland rivers with minimal gradient, as well as for certain flowering plants and bryophytes.

The river shows a clear downstream succession in plant communities reflecting variations in geology, flow rate and land use. In particular the river exhibits a natural increase in dissolved minerals as it flows over the underlying geology of Old Red Sandstone and Carboniferous Limestone. Localised differences in water chemistry are also created where major tributaries, such as the River Lugg, enter the main channel. In its tidal reaches the river becomes increasingly saline as it nears its confluence with the Severn Estuary.

The invertebrate fauna (molluscs; beetles; mayflies; caddis flies; true flies and dragonflies) is characteristic of a large lowland river and is of special interest for species associated with riffles, river shingles and saltmarsh, river deadwood and bankside vegetation. The fish fauna includes, Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar*), twaite shad (*Alosa fallax*), allis shad (*Alosa alosa*) and bullhead (*Cottus gobio*) as well as three species of lamprey (*Petromyzon marinus*, *Lampetra planeri* and *Lampetra fluviatilis*) which are all of European importance and are listed on Annex II of the EU Habitats & Species Directive. The site is also of international importance for its Atlantic stream crayfish (*Austropotamobius pallipes*), common otter (*Lutra lutra*) and beds of water crowfoot (*Ranunculus* spp.).

Whilst not a special feature of the site, there is a good range of breeding birds associated with riverine habitats.

The SSSI incorporates adjacent areas of riparian habitat including wet woodland, marshy grassland, reed beds and topographical features which directly support the special interest of the river.

### **Geology and Topography**

The catchment of the Lower Wye is 2513km<sup>2</sup> in area and is predominately low lying, the Radnor Forest and Black Mountains being the most significant upland areas within it. The river is thus lowland in character, meandering across a flood plain up to 2km wide and falling from 72m AOD at Hay-on-Wye to sea level over a distance of 157km.

Between Hay-on-Wye and Goodrich the River Wye (Lower Wye) flows over a Lower Old Red Sandstone substrate composed of sandstones and marls with occasional limestone bands. The river bed is comprised of gravels, silt and occasional boulders. Below Goodrich it enters the Wye Valley Gorge. Here the river flows over Carboniferous Limestone outcrops, cutting near-vertical cliffs within a restricted floodplain. Over thousands of years land level rise relative to sea level fall has caused the channel to become incised, leaving distinct shelves of land like that at Livox Quarry. The floodplain widens where major tributaries, such as the Trothy and Monnow, join the main channel before the river re-enters the Wye Valley Gorge again with its vertical limestone cliffs and more gentle sandstone and mudstone slopes.

In the lower parts of the Wye Gorge the river becomes tidal and brackish and there is a gradual transition to estuarine conditions. Bedrock and boulders commonly constitute the bank and bed material but are usually overlain with silty alluvium. At Chepstow dramatic vertical cliffs have been cut through the limestone. Between Chepstow and the Severn Estuary the river flows over Triassic Mercia mudstones which eventually give way to the alluvium of the Severn coastal plain.

The River Wye (Lower Wye) has a relatively natural fluvio-geomorphic regime and has remained relatively free from man-made straightening, widening and deepening schemes. The upper and middle sections are active, migrating meanders depositing shingle point bars and islands, and cutting vertical faces into the banks. The pattern of meander loops along the entire length of the river is complex, steep outer slopes contrasting with shallow slip-off slopes.

In many places, increased gradients expose extensive gravel substrates over which the river forms complex pool and riffle sections. Few examples of oxbow lakes and active back channels remain adjacent to the river.

## Flora

In its upper and middle reaches the river channel is dominated by submerged flowering plants such as spiked water milfoil (*Myriophyllum spicatum*) and beds of water crowfoot (*Ranunculus fluitans*). Other common plants include rigid hornwort (*Ceratophyllum demersum*) and perfoliate pondweed (*Potamogeton perfoliatus*). Rare aquatic species include whorled water milfoil (*Myriophyllum verticillatum*). In the lower reaches of river through the Wye Gorge, the calcium and nutrient content of the water increases. Here, aquatic vegetation is mainly comprised of pondweed species such as fennel pondweed (*Potamogeton pectinatus*) and curled pondweed (*P. crispus*). Aquatic macrophytes disappear below the tidal limit at Brockweir and marginal vegetation is often absent or much reduced below this point due to tidal scour. However, some species thrive along the transition zone between brackish and freshwater conditions where large areas of mud are exposed at low tide.

Marginal vegetation often consists of reed canary-grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*) and branched bur-reed (*Sparganium erectum*). Other marginal plants such as amphibious water bistort (*Polygonum amphibium*), brooklime (*Veronica beccabunga*), yellow-cress (*Rorripa* spp.) and water forget-me-not (*Myosotis scorpioides*) are widespread and frequent. (The nationally scarce horse-tail (*Equisetum x litorale*) is found growing along the margins of the river in its upper section). Below Brockweir the upper mud banks of the river are colonised by salt-marsh species such as sea aster (*Aster tripolium*), saltmarsh-grass (*Puccinellia* spp.) and sea-milkwort (*Glaux maritima*).

Characteristic bankside plants include stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*), great willowherb (*Epilobium hirsutum*) and reed canary-grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*). Locally the river bank vegetation can be diverse containing species such as common black knapweed (*Centaurea nigra*) and comfrey (*Symphytum* spp.). A number of rare and restricted species occur along the river banks, including common meadow-rue (*Thalictrum flavum*), meadow saxifrage (*Saxifraga granulata*) and chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*). The latter species grows in deep crevices in riverside outcrops and bedrock. Along wooded brackish reaches of the river, the banks become almost entirely dominated by stands of couch grass (*Elytrigia repens*).

The riverbank is frequently tree lined. Willows (*Salix* spp.) are common along the upper and middle sections whilst alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) and ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) become more frequent in the lower reaches. Sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*) is widespread along the length of the river.

The adjacent land use through the Hereford Plain is dominated by mixed farming with occasional oak (*Quercus* spp.), ash and sycamore woodland running down to the river. Below Goodrich the river enters the Wye Valley Gorge cutting through a landscape of permanent pasture and steep woodlands before flowing through the coastal grassland plain and entering the Severn Estuary.

## Mammals

The common otter (*Lutra lutra*) is widespread along the length of the river where appropriate bankside cover exists. The roots of mature bankside trees are often used as otter holts. Water voles (*Arvicola terrestris*) can be found along the middle sections of the river.

The bankside tree cover provides valuable feeding and roosting habitats for several bat species including the greater horseshoe (*Rhinolophus ferrumequinum*) and Daubenton's bat (*Myotis daubentonii*).

## **Invertebrates**

The River Wye's invertebrate community is characteristic of a large lowland river. Several invertebrate species associated with such conditions include the nationally rare mayfly (*Potamanthus luteus*) and the caddis fly (*Hydroptila lotensis*) together with the nationally scarce stonefly (*Brachyptera putata*) and the club-tailed dragonfly (*Gomphus vulgatissimus*). Through the middle reaches of the river the black-tailed skimmer (*Orthetrum cancellatum*) breeds on the north western edge of its distribution. The thick emergent fringes of vegetation on the banks provide cover and breeding habitat for the white-legged damselfly (*Platycnemis pennipes*).

The river is of high invertebrate interest for species associated with riffle, shingle and saltmarsh habitats. Of particular interest are the riffle beetles (*Normandia nitens*) and (*Oulimnius major*) and the shingle beetle (*Neobisnius proxlixus*), all of which are nationally rare. Nine other nationally scarce beetles associated with these habitats have been recorded including (*Chaetocnema sahlbergi*) and (*Pogonus littoralis*), which are both found on saltmarsh.

Several nationally rare invertebrate species are associated with river dead wood such as the beetle (*Macronychus quadrituberculatus*) and the caddis flies (*Oecetis notata*). Other nationally rare species are associated with sandy river banks such as the crane fly (*Limonia omissinervis*).

Bankside trees and tall ruderal herbs provide ideal habitat for five nationally scarce species of moth, including the waved carpet (*Hydrelia sylvata*) and the micro moth (*Mompha langiella*).

All six British species of unionid mussels occur on the river, including the scarce depressed river mussel (*Pseudanodonta complanata*). This is believed to be a unique assemblage in Britain. The nationally rare snail (*Pseudamnicola confusa*) is also present and is restricted to the saline reaches of the river.

## **Fish**

The river has a wide range of migratory and non-migratory fish species. The most abundant coarse species include chub (*Leuciscus cephalus*), dace (*Leuciscus leuciscus*) and pike (*Esox lucius*) which together with roach (*Rutilus rutilus*) and perch (*Perca fluviatilis*) are the most widely distributed fish along the river. Species such as tench (*Tinca tinca*) and ruffe (*Gymnocephalus cernua*) are restricted to the lower reaches.

Sea lamprey (*Petromyzon marinus*), river lamprey (*Lampetra fluviatilis*), twaite shad (*Alosa fallax*) and the very rare allis shad (*Alosa alosa*) all migrate into the river each year from the Severn Estuary and spawn at various localities along its length. Large numbers of elvers (*Anguilla anguilla*) migrate up the river with the spring high tides. The river also supports internationally important populations of brook lamprey (*Lampetra planeri*) and bullhead (*Cottus gobio*).

Several game fish species including grayling (*Thymallus thymallus*), brown trout (*Salmo trutta fario*) and sea trout (*Salmo trutta trutta*) breed and migrate along the River Wye (Lower Wye).

Important numbers of Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar*) migrate up the main channel in order to reach spawning grounds in the headwaters of the Wye.

## **Birds**

The River Wye (Lower Wye) supports a varied assemblage of breeding birds associated with rivers. Several species including the mute swan (*Cygnus olor*) and coot (*Fulica atra*) are associated with its slow flowing reaches and breed along the length of the river. However, species associated with upland streams and rivers such as dipper (*Cinclus cinclus*) and grey wagtail (*Motacillia cinerea*) also breed along the faster flowing sections, especially where rapids occur. Sedge warbler (*Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*) and reed bunting (*Emberiza schoeniclus*) breed in riparian habitat along the river banks.

Extensive shingle shoals provide suitable breeding habitat for the little ringed plover (*Charadrius dubius*) whilst vertical banks provide nesting sites for the sand martin (*Riparia riparia*) and kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*). Goosanders (*Mergus merganser*) are present throughout most of the year. The tidal reaches of the river support breeding shelduck (*Tadorna tadorna*) and an established heronry.

Occasional low lying, wet areas of land adjacent to the river support breeding wader species including snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*) and lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*), whilst common sandpiper (*Actitis hypoleucos*) is widely distributed along the length of the river.