

Site name: Upper Nene Valley Gravel Pits **County:** Northamptonshire

District: East Northamptonshire, Northampton, South Northamptonshire, Wellingborough

Status: Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) notified under section 28C of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 as inserted by Schedule 9 to the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000

Local Planning Authority: East Northamptonshire District Council, Borough Council of Wellingborough, Northampton Borough Council, South Northamptonshire District Council, Northamptonshire County Council

National Grid reference: SP 966717 **Area:** 1381.87 ha

Ordnance Survey sheet: **1:50,000** 141, 152 **1:10,000:** TL07NW; TL08SW; SP98SE; SP97SE/NE; SP96NW/NE/SW; SP86SE/NE/SW

Notification date: 24 November 2005

Reasons for notification:

The Upper Nene Valley Gravel Pits SSSI is a nationally important site for its breeding bird assemblage of lowland open waters and their margins (including the largest nesting colony of grey herons *Ardea cinerea* in Northamptonshire), wintering waterbird species, an assemblage of over 20,000 waterbirds in the non-breeding season and a rare example of wet floodplain woodland.

General description:

This chain of both active and exhausted sand and gravel pits extends for approximately 35 kilometres along the alluvial deposits of the River Nene floodplain from Clifford Hill on the southern outskirts of Northampton, downstream to Thorpe Waterville, north of Thrapston. They form an extensive series of shallow and deep open waters which occur in association with a wide range of marginal features, such as sparsely-vegetated islands, gravel bars and shorelines, and habitats including reedswamp, marsh, wet ditches, rush pasture, rough grassland and scattered scrub. This range of habitat and the varied topography of the lagoons provide valuable nesting, resting and feeding conditions to sustain nationally important numbers and assemblages of breeding and wintering birds.

The extensive open waters of the Upper Nene Valley Gravel Pits collectively form one of the most important inland localities in England for waterbirds in the non-breeding season. The lagoons associated with the six pit complexes at Thrapston, Ringstead, Stanwick, Ditchford, Earls Barton and Clifford Hill are all particularly significant as waterfowl refuges, together regularly supporting peak numbers of birds in excess of 20,000 individuals, comprising more than forty species. As well as the waterbird species listed below, which individually occur in nationally important numbers, this assemblage regularly includes large numbers (greater than 2,000

individuals) of mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* and lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*. Eleven species of waterbird regularly winter here in nationally important numbers: mute swan *Cygnus olor*, wigeon *Anas penelope*, gadwall *A. strepera*, shoveler *A. clypeata*, tufted duck *Aythya fuligula*, pochard *A. ferina*, great crested grebe *Podiceps cristatus*, cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*, bittern *Botaurus stellaris*, coot *Fulica atra* and golden plover *Pluvialis apricaria*.

The Upper Nene Valley Gravel Pits are considered to be of exceptional significance for the variety and quality of breeding birds associated with their open water and marginal habitats. The pit complexes at Earls Barton, Stanwick and Ditchford are of particular importance for this assemblage, although many of the species occur throughout the SSSI. At least 21 species comprise a regular breeding assemblage which includes mute swan, gadwall, shoveler, pochard, tufted duck, little grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*, great crested grebe and wading birds such as redshank *Tringa totanus*, which have suffered a steady population decline across the region. Exposed shoreline margins, banks and sparsely-vegetated gravel islands within the lagoons provide nesting sites for little ringed plover *Charadrius dubius*, ringed plover *C. hiaticula*, kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*, and colonies of common tern *Sterna hirundo*, including the largest two in the county at Earls Barton and Stanwick. Breeding reed warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*, sedge warbler *A. schoenobaenus* and the rare Cetti's warbler *Cettia cetti*, along with water rail *Rallus aquaticus*, cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*, yellow wagtail *Motacilla flava*, grey wagtail *M. cinerea* and reed bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*, are associated with damp grassland, scattered scrub and stands of marginal vegetation at the lagoon edges. This assemblage also includes the largest breeding colony of grey herons in the county at a former duck decoy at Titchmarsh within the Thrapston gravel pit complex. These tree-nesting birds utilise woodland around the disused decoy pond which consists of several different species of trees and shrubs including silver birch *Betula pendula*, crack willow *Salix fragilis*, Scots pine *Pinus sylvestris* and alder *Alnus glutinosa*.

Stands of wet floodplain woodland occur on past gravel workings and include those at Earls Barton which form the largest example of this now scarce woodland type in the county. Mature stands are largely dominated by white willow *Salix alba* with crack willow *S. fragilis* and occasionally ash *Fraxinus excelsior*, Osier *S. viminalis* and grey willow *S. cinerea* dominate a dense and varied shrub layer amongst an abundance of fallen decaying timber, occurring with others such as almond willow *S. triandra*, hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, buckthorn *Rhamnus carthaticus* and blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*. The field layer of this woodland is generally species-poor but characteristic of these seasonally inundated stands, with frequent common nettle *Urtica dioica*, skullcap *Sculletaria galericulata*, cleavers *Galium aparine*, marsh bedstraw *G. palustre*, rough meadow-grass *Poa trivialis* and fen species such as lesser pond sedge *Carex acutiformis* and reed canary-grass *Phalaris arundinacea*. More open areas of carr are dominated by young stands of willow scrub and reedswamp which fringe a number of open ponds and pools.