

Curlews

As far as I'm aware nothing, or very little, has yet been said by the applicant about curlews. If that is the case, this omission reveals several things about the applicant: indifference to an important indicator species; indifference to the history of wildlife in this area and what that history signifies for the future; indifference to local efforts to reintroduce curlews; and ignorance about how other applications for solar farm developments have been delayed because of potential impact on curlews.

In the 1950s and -60s curlews were common here. When we moved to [REDACTED] we had frequent conversations with neighbouring farmers and others on why they had disappeared. One theory was land drainage. Another more recent theory was the killing of dung beetles, a preferred food of curlews, by livestock wormers such as avermectins.

Whatever the reason, BBOWT, the Bucks, Berks and Oxon Wildlife Trust, largely with funding from Bucks Council, started efforts to reintroduce curlews. The River Ray is one of the best areas in central England for locally scarce wading birds. The first curlew usually return to the Upper Ray Meadows, managed by BBOWT, in late February, and by early spring lapwing and curlew can be seen displaying across the reserve. Bucks Council has recently funded badger- and fox-fencing at Gallows Bridge Farm, one of these Upper Ray Meadows, to protect these ground-nesting birds. Gallows Bridge Farm is just 4.5 miles from the proposed solar farm development at the Claydons. Gallows Bridge Farm is intended to be a fully protected breeding centre for curlews from which they can then expand into the surrounding countryside. At the same time, farmers are being encouraged through funding by the Freshwater Habitats Trust/Bucks Council/BBOWT to put in ponds and scrapes to encourage such local expansion by curlews. On this farm we have recently put in six such ponds. So, there's a lot going on, both publicly and privately, to encourage curlews to return to this area. How then might this be impacted by solar farms development in the Claydons? To find out, one only has to Google "curlews and solar panels". Let me summarise what it says.

It begins: "The construction of large-scale solar arrays in rural areas poses a significant risk to the nesting and foraging grounds of curlews."

It goes on.

a) Habitat Disruption: Large-scale, ground-mounted solar projects (e.g. 100 acre [!!!!] sites (my exclamation marks)) can disrupt the open, rural habitats that curlews require, leading to potential population declines.

b) Conservation Status: Because curlews are considered vulnerable on the European Red List and have experienced a 50% decline in the UK over the last 25 years, their presence often triggers planning delays for solar developments.

And so it goes on. It's worth reading, and is highly relevant to the situation here in the Claydons.

The applicant would probably argue that there aren't any curlews here now. That's true, but we know they were common here 50 years ago and that this is prime curlew habitat, at least potentially. BBOWT would argue, as would I, that we're probably on the cusp of a curlew revival. Many local farmers would now admit that their farming practices did a lot to wipe out curlews, but we're all much wiser now. When I started farming here I was considered eccentric to even talk about dung-beetle-friendly wormers and to keep my cattle out all year so as not to disrupt the dung beetle life cycle. I didn't know it then, but it is now accepted that dung beetles are a curlew's prime food.