

Reptile and Amphibian Survey Report for Highover Farm, Highover Way, Hitchin, Herts, SG4 0RQ



Cotswold Wildlife Surveys

August and September 2024

QUALITY CONTROL

Date	Version	Name
29.07.24	Set out artificial refugia	Andy Warren – BSc (Hons), MA (LM), Tech Cert (Arbor A), MCIEEM Director
15.08.24 19.08.24 26.08.24 01.09.24 08.09.24 16.08.24 28.09.24	Refugia checks	Andy Warren – BSc (Hons), MA (LM), Tech Cert (Arbor A), MCIEEM Director Mollie Paxford – BSc (Hons), MSc Associate
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The information in this report has been prepared in accordance with the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management's (CIEEM) Code of Professional Conduct. The conclusions and recommendations expressed are reasoned judgements based on the evidence.

Every reasonable attempt has been made to comply with BS42020:2013 *Biodiversity – Code of practice for planning and development*, *CIEEM Guidelines for Ecological Report Writing* (CIEEM, 2017). If there has been deviation from recognised practice, justification/explanation has been given.

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SUMMARY

At Highover Farm on Highover Way in Hitchin, planning permission is being sought for the re-development of the farm.

In late July 2024, Cotswold Wildlife Surveys was instructed to carry out a Preliminary Ecological Appraisal of the site. The Phase 1 Habitat survey took place on 29th July 2024.

An ecological data search for the area revealed the presence of Common Lizards *Zootoca vivipara* on nearby land, where surveys by WSP in June and July 2020 and 2016 recorded a good population. Just one lizard was found on the boundary adjoining Highover Farm in 2020.

In addition, there is a pond (P1) in the neighbouring land 130 m north of the farm complex, and a second small pond (P2) in the garden of the farmhouse. A survey for Great Crested Newts (GCN) *Triturus cristatus* was therefore carried out by WSP in 2016. This revealed no GCN in P1 and P2 was dry, making it unsuitable for breeding GCN.

Given the above, a full reptile survey was recommended to determine the presence or absence of reptiles at Highover Farm, whilst the pond on site (P2) was also to be re-inspected for amphibians.

On 29th July 2024, a terrestrial search was undertaken by Cotswold Wildlife Surveys, following which 80 artificial refugia (0.5 m² sheets of tarred felt) were placed around the survey site. This focused on the areas which were considered most likely to be used by reptiles, and which were also accessible and not overgrown.

The refugia were allowed to 'bed-in' for two and a half weeks, after which seven visits were made between 15th August and 28th September 2024 to check for reptile presence.

Torchlight searches of the pond were made on 15th August and 12th September 2024.

No reptiles were found during the survey period, but a single immature Common Toad *Bufo bufo*, a single adult Common Frog *Rana temporaria* and up to 10 juvenile and one adult Smooth Newts *Lissotriton vulgaris* were recorded under the refugia.

At the times of the surveys, Highover Farm was not identified as a reptile site, and no mitigation measures for reptiles are considered necessary.

However, common amphibians are present, so a Precautionary Method of Working will be implemented to ensure that amphibians are not harmed by the development.

1. INTRODUCTION

At Highover Farm on Highover Way in Hitchin, planning permission is being sought for the re-development of the farm.

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Given the above, a full reptile survey was recommended to determine the presence or absence of reptiles at Highover Farm, whilst the pond on site (P2) was also to be re-inspected for amphibians.

The results of these surveys are contained in this report.

All common reptiles (Common Lizard, Grass Snake *Natrix natrix*, Slow-worm *Anguis fragilis* and Adder *Vipera berus*) are afforded legal protection under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) largely as a consequence of a national decline in numbers associated with persecution and habitat loss.

Under the terms of the Act it is illegal to intentionally kill or injure a reptile.

Great Crested Newts are protected under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife & Countryside Act (1981) as amended, and Schedule 2 of the Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc.) Regulations 1994 (Regulation 38). As a result of their rarity across Europe, they are also protected under Annexes IIa and IVa of the Habitats and Species Directive, and under the Berne Convention (the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats).

The above legislation can be summarised thus (Langton *et al*, 2001):

- ❑ *Intentionally or deliberately capture or kill, or intentionally injure Great Crested Newts;*
- ❑ *Deliberately disturb Great Crested Newts or intentionally or recklessly disturb them in a place used for shelter or protection;*
- ❑ *Damage or destroy a breeding or resting place;*
- ❑ *Intentionally or recklessly damage, destroy or obstruct access to a place used for shelter or protection;*
- ❑ *Possess a Great Crested Newt, or any part of it, unless acquired lawfully;*
- ❑ *Sell, barter, exchange or offer for sale Great Crested Newts or parts of them.*

2. METHODOLOGY

Commoner reptiles which may be encountered in suburban and rural areas in Hitchin include Grass Snake, Slow-worm, and Common Lizard.

During the winter months, from mid-October to late February or early March, they are in hibernation, usually deep in underground hibernacula, such as holes and cracks in the ground, among rocks or the roots of large trees, down animal burrows, or in piles of rubble or stone.

In the spring and summer they live above ground in well-vegetated places, with Grass Snakes often near or in water. Being cold-blooded all reptiles like to bask, and can often be found in open places.

There are very few signs of reptile presence, but these include:

- ❑ Shedded skin (snakes);
- ❑ Eggs (but not Common Lizard which gives birth to live young).

The survey methodology followed guidelines produced by the Herpetofauna Groups of Britain and Ireland (Froglife 1999; Gent & Gibson 1998), and involved laying refugia (squares of tarred felt) of at least 0.5 m² in size in suitable habitat and surveying them during suitable weather conditions.

It is recommended that the refuges are left for at least one week to 'bed-in' and to provide time for reptiles to locate them. Each refuge should then be checked on seven subsequent occasions during an optimum time of day and optimum weather conditions (temperature between 9°C and 18°C with intermittent or hazy sunshine, and little or no wind).

Current guidelines (Froglife 1999) state that the number of refuges required depends on a number of factors including the size of site and likelihood of disturbance. Whilst stating that the more refuges used increases both the chance of finding reptiles and a higher number of reptiles being seen, the guidelines recommend that for general survey purposes between 5 and 10 refuges per hectare is adequate.

At Highover Farm, a terrestrial search of the survey area was made on 29th July 2024, following which a total of 80 artificial refugia were set out around the site. This focused on the areas which were considered most likely to be used by reptiles, and which were also accessible and not overgrown.

The refugia were allowed to 'bed-in' for two and a half weeks, after which seven visits were made between 15th August and 28th September 2024 to check for reptile presence.

Although outside the recommended survey period for adult Great Crested Newts, torchlight searches of the pond on site (P2) were carried out on 15th August and 12th September 2024, as juvenile newts would be present if the pond was used for breeding.

The results of the visits are detailed in Section 3.

3. RESULTS

A terrestrial search of the site was undertaken by Andy Warren on 29th July 2024. Although no basking or hiding reptiles were recorded, the search identified the best locations for the artificial refugia.

A total of 80 ‘mats’ were set out around the survey area. This focused on the areas which were considered most likely to be used by reptiles, and which were also accessible and not overgrown.

The locations of the refugia are shown in Appendix 1.

The refugia were allowed to ‘bed-in’ for two and a half weeks, after which they were checked on seven occasions between August and September 2024.

The weather conditions during the time of the surveys were recorded and are presented in Table 1.

Date	Temp (°C)	Cloud cover (%)	Precipitation	Wind speed (Beaufort scale)
15.08.24	19.0	100	None	3 SW
19.08.24	14.0	20	None	1-2 SSW
26.08.24	19.5	60	None	2 WSW
01.09.24	20.0	0	None	1-2 W
08.09.24	19.0	80	None	1 SSE
16.09.24	17.0	0	None	1 S
28.09.24	12.0	100	None	2-3 NNW

Table 1 Weather conditions during the refugia checks

The results of the refugia checks are detailed in Table 2 below.

Date	Reptiles	Amphibians	Other
15.08.24	0	1 imm Common Toad 2 juv Smooth Newts	-
19.08.24	0	1 imm Common Toad 4 juv Smooth Newts	-

26.08.24	0	10 juv Smooth Newts	-
01.09.24	0	5 juv Smooth Newts	-
08.09.24	0	1 imm Common Toad 1 ad Common Frog 3 juv Smooth Newts	-
16.09.24	0	1 ad Smooth Newt	-
28.09.24	0	0	-

Table 2 Results of the refugia checks

No reptiles were found during the survey period. However, a single immature Common Toad (Fig. 1), a single adult Common Frog (Fig. 2) and up to 10 juvenile and one adult Smooth Newt were recorded (Figs. 3 and 4).



Figs. 1 & 2 Common Toad (L) and Common Frog (R)



Figs. 3 & 4 Juvenile Smooth Newts

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

At Highover Farm on Highover Way in Hitchin, planning permission is being sought for the re-development of the farm.

Given the presence of Common Lizards on neighbouring land, a full reptile survey was carried out to determine the presence or absence of reptiles, whilst the pond on site (P2) was also re-inspected for amphibians.

No reptiles were found during the survey period, but a single immature Common Toad, a single adult Common Frog and up to one adult and 10 juvenile Smooth Newts were recorded under the refugia.

At the times of the surveys, Highover Farm was not identified as a reptile site, and no mitigation measures for reptiles are considered necessary.

However, common amphibians are present, so the following Precautionary Method of Working will be implemented to ensure that amphibians are not harmed by the development.

- ❑ Prior to any works commencing, contractors will be briefed by an ecologist on the presence of the nearby ponds and the possibility that Great Crested Newts and/or other amphibians might be present, and what to do if one is unexpectedly discovered during construction;
- ❑ Ground clearance and excavations for footings should then ideally be undertaken during the main amphibian active period (April to October), to ensure that hibernating animals are not present, as these should not be disturbed;
- ❑ Vegetation to be removed should initially be cut down to a height of approximately 100 mm, so that the ground beneath can be inspected by an ecologist. If no amphibians are present, the remaining vegetation can be stripped, followed by removal of the turf and topsoil;
- ❑ If a common amphibian is found, it will be carefully caught and relocated to a safe, undisturbed area well away from the construction zone. If a Great Crested Newt is found, advice will be sought from Natural England on whether works can proceed without committing an offence;
- ❑ As soon as the footprint for the re-development has been declared free of animals by the ecologist, the excavations for the foundations can be undertaken. Any trenches excavated will be covered at the end of the working day to avoid animals falling into the trench. If this is not possible escape routes will be provided. These can be in the form of branches or boards placed on the bottom of the trench, with their upper ends above ground level and touching the sides, or sloping ends left in trenches;

- ❑ Material arising during construction will be stored on hardstanding or off the ground to prevent newts or other amphibians using them as refuges. This will be subsequently removed from site by hand;
- ❑ All new building and other materials will be stored on pallets, preferably on hardstanding, to prevent animals using these as refuges. This will be particularly important during the winter months (November to March) when newts seek hibernation sites;
- ❑ Since the risk of committing an offence is minimal, to reduce that risk further, working practices will be restricted to the daylight hours when amphibians are least active in the terrestrial environment;
- ❑ At the end of the construction process, all items will again be removed carefully from site, checking for amphibians;
- ❑ A copy of this method statement will be kept on site, as it also includes the contact details of the licenced ecologist.

It should be noted that given the small scale of the works, there will be no requirement for a licence from Natural England.

Furthermore, the construction site does not need to be fenced off with a temporary amphibian exclusion barrier provided the above measures are adhered to.

5. REFERENCES

Arnold, E. N. and Burton, J. A., 1978. *Reptiles and amphibians of Britain & Europe*. Collins, Grafton Street, London.

Froglife, 1999. *Reptile Survey*. Froglife Advice Sheet 10.

Gent, T. and Gibson, S., 1998. *Herpetofauna Workers' Manual*. Joint Nature Conservation Committee

Langton, T., Beckett, C. and Foster, J., 2001. *Great Crested Newt: Conservation Handbook*. Froglife, Suffolk.

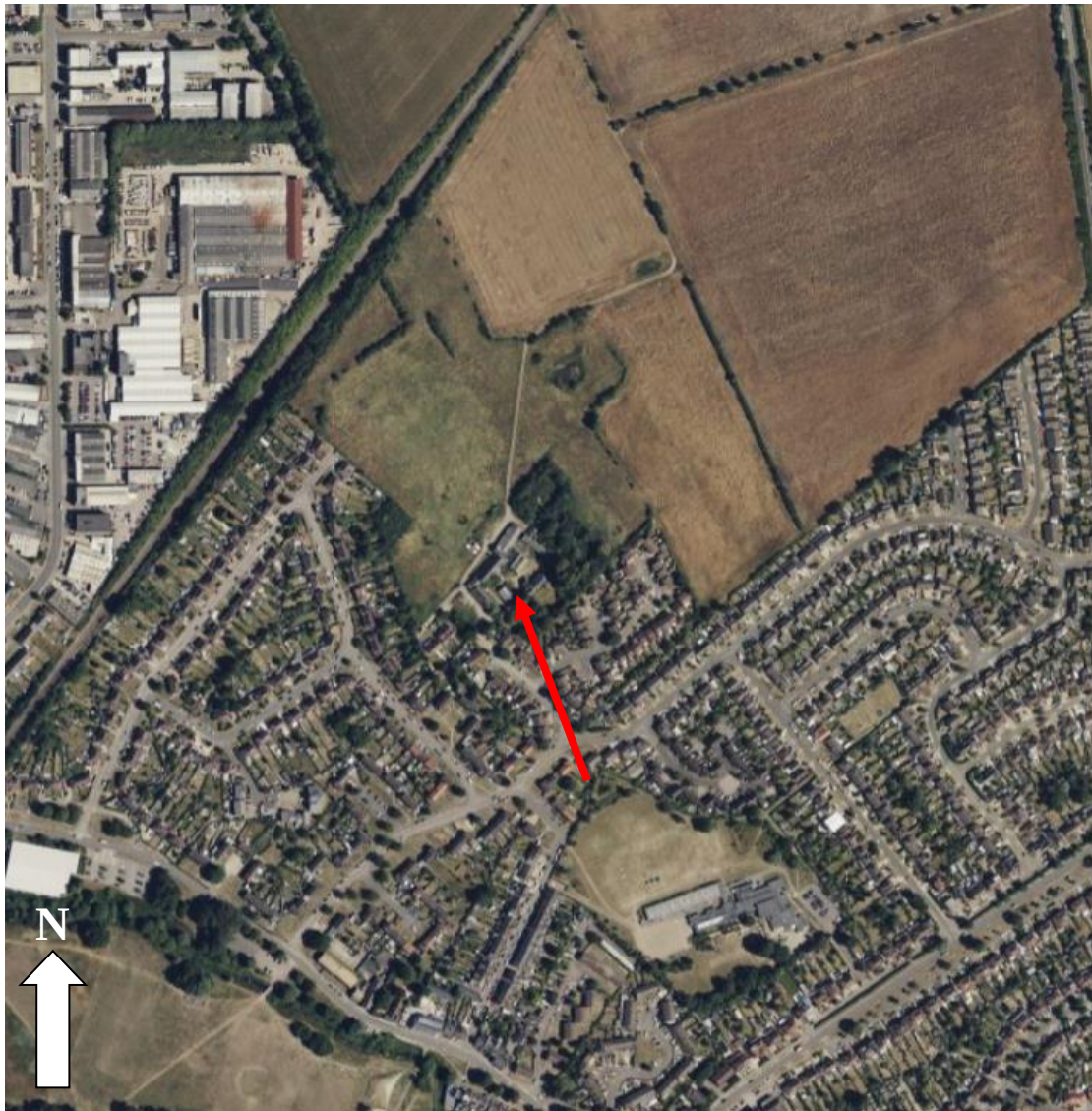
APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Location plan

Appendix 2: Site plan

Appendix 3: Locations of artificial refugia

Appendix 1: Location plan



Highover Farm

Appendix 2: Site layout



Highover Farm

Appendix 3: Locations of artificial refugia



Artificial refugia ★

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Highover Farm, Highover Way, Hitchin – Reptile & Amphibian Survey

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