

PRELIMINARY ECOLOGICAL APPRAISAL
REPORT

BIRD HIDE AT BUTLERS FARM, DONHEAD
ST. MARY, WILTSHIRE

By

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MARCH 2025

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INTRODUCTION

Stark Ecology Ltd was asked by Jessica Ridley to carry out a Preliminary Ecological Appraisal of land at Butlers Farm, Donhead St. Mary, Wiltshire where a new bird hide with access track is proposed.

The site is located at OS Grid Reference ST892246 in a rural area to the east of Shaftesbury. The site is surrounded by mixed farmland with excellent hedgerow and woodland networks.



Fig 1: A bird hide is proposed on this parcel of land at Butlers Farm where a new lake (not shown) has been created.

The Preliminary Ecological Appraisal was carried out by Georgie Starkie BSc (Hons) MSc MRSB on 26th November 2024 when the weather was clear and dry with some cloud and a light wind. The temperature was c.10°C.

METHODOLOGY

Data Search

A data search was requested from the Wiltshire and Swindon Biological Records Centre (WSBRC) for records of protected species and habitats within 1km of the site.

The MAGIC website was used to search for details of protected and designated sites within 1km and for details of any European Protected Species licences which have been granted by Natural England for work at sites within 1km of the position of the new bird hide.

Ecological survey work has been carried out across the wider Butlers Farm site, including in 2021 to inform an application for permission to create four freshwater lakes, including the lake which the bird hide which is the subject of this application will look out over (Planning Reference PL/2022/02562). The results of those surveys were reviewed.

Preliminary Ecological Appraisal

The site was surveyed according to the Guidelines for Preliminary Ecological Appraisal set out by the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM), in which the habitats present on site are classified (according to The UK Habitat Classification Version 2.0) and any signs of protected or notable species were also recorded:

Bats: The on-site habitats were assessed for their value to bats when commuting and foraging. There are no structures or features within the site that could be suitable for roosting bats.

[REDACTED]

Great crested newts: The habitats on and surrounding the site were assessed for their suitability to support great crested newts.

Reptiles: The habitats on site were assessed for their suitability to support reptile species.

Nesting birds: The habitats on site were assessed for their suitability to support nesting birds.

Hedgehog: The habitats on site were assessed for their suitability to support hedgehog.

Limitations

This survey provides a brief snapshot of the site at the time the work was carried out and while every step was taken to ensure that the results of the survey are accurate, features of ecological value can change and therefore this report is only valid for 12 months.

RESULTS

Desk Study

Habitats

There are no Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) or Special Protection Areas (SPA) within 1km of the position of the new bird hide but Gutch Common Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), which supports a mosaic of inter-related habitats with wet and dry acidic woodlands, expansive areas of bracken with acidic flushes and a neutral meadow, is c.800m to the north.

There are five Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) within 1km of the position of the new bird hide at Butlers Farm, as summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) within 1km of the new bird hide at Butlers Farm.

Local Wildlife Site	Reason for Designation	Distance and Direction
Farm Close Hanging	Ancient semi-natural broadleaved hanging woodland.	120m N
Wincombe Pasture	A tiny damp meadow bordered by pasture.	700m SW
Donhead Clift	A large oak woodland with Rowan, Holly, Birch and Hazel on a steep north-east facing slope. The ground flora is dominated by ferns and bracken.	750m NE
Great Wincombe Wood	An ancient woodland site with species rich areas of alder and mixed deciduous woodland larch plantation in drier areas.	750m SW
Clift Farm Meadow	A small damp pasture with very interesting topography, with flushes emerging where the Upper Greensand overlies the Gault.	850m NE

The site itself does not support any Priority Habitats but nearby woodland is identified as Priority Habitat Inventory Deciduous Woodland and Ancient & Semi-Natural Woodland.

The land on which the new bird hide will be built was included in botanical surveys by Martin Buckland (on behalf of Gareth Harris Ecology & Conservation) in June 2021 and confirmed that this parcel of land (identified as 7: Pasture in the report of that survey) was “the poorest land” on Butlers Farm and was dominated by soft brome *Bromus hordeaceus* and Yorkshire fog *Holcus lanatus* at that time.

Species

The following bat species have been recorded within 1km of Butlers Farm:

- Barbastelle *Barbastella barbastellus**
- Lesser horseshoe *Rhinolophus hipposideros*
- Greater horseshoe *R. ferrumequinum*
- Serotine *Eptesicus serotinus**
- Daubenton’s *Myotis daubentonii*
- Natterer’s *M. nattereri**
- Whiskered *M. mystacinus*
- Noctule *Nyctalus noctula**
- Common pipistrelle *Pipistrellus pipistrellus**
- Soprano pipistrelle *P. pygmaeus**
- Brown long-eared *Plecotus auritus*.

* Species recorded at Butlers Farm.

Hazel dormouse *Muscardinus avellanarius*, brown hare *Lepus europaeus* and [REDACTED] [REDACTED] have all been recorded within 1km of the site, including records of dormouse and brown hare at Butlers Farm.

Great crested newt *Triturus cristata* have been recorded as recently as 2022 within 250m of the location of the new bird hide at Butlers Farm. The only reptile records returned were for adder *Vipera berus* and both records of this species are from the 1970s.

Bird records which relate to Butlers Farm include woodcock *Scolopax rusticola*, red kite *Milvus milvus*, yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella*, bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*, wren *Troglodytes troglodytes* and tawny owl *Strix aluco*.

The MAGIC website lists no records of European Protected Species licences granted for work at locations within 1km of the position of the new bird hide at Butlers Farm.

Preliminary Ecological Appraisal

The site includes an existing access track which runs into the field across the grassland and areas of ground that have recently been made up with the arisings from the freshwater pond which received consent through application reference PL/2022/02562.

This survey focussed on the area of the site where the bird hide will be built and the length of the access track where an access path will be built raised slightly above the ground.



Fig 2: The new bird hide will look out over this newly created lake (constructed during 2022).

This photo taken facing west on 26th November 2024.



Fig 3: The new bird hide will be constructed on this area of made up ground which was created in 2022 during work consented by planning reference number PL/2022/02562.

This photo taken facing east on 26th November 2024.

Species that were identified in November 2024 within the areas of made up ground which will be affected by the construction of the new bird hide and access track included creeping buttercup *Ranunculus repens*, cocksfoot *Dactylis glomerata*, dock *Rumex obtusifolius*, white clover *Trifolium repens*, red clover *T. pratense*, common rush *Juncus effusus*, kidney vetch *Anthyllis vulneraria*, spiny sowthistle *Sonchus asper*, common yarrow *Achillea millefolium* and creeping bent grass *Agrostis stolonifera*.



Fig 4: The access track will be constructed on this area of made up ground which was created in 2022 during work consented by planning reference number PL/2022/02562.

This photo taken facing east on 26th November 2024.

Given the condition of the field when it was surveyed in 2021, and the species that are present in 2024, the site is considered to support Modified Grassland throughout the area on which the bird hide and access track will be constructed. A Condition Assessment (submitted as a separate document) confirms that this habitat is in Poor condition.

Bats

Roosting

There are no features within the site boundaries that provide roosting opportunities for bats.

Commuting and Foraging

The grassland and new pond provide high quality habitat for bats to use when commuting and foraging through the surrounding landscape and there is excellent connectivity to high quality habitat nearby (eg. woodland, grazed farmland etc).

Badgers

No setts or other evidence of badgers was identified within the site but it supports suitable habitat for badgers as they commute and forage through the surrounding landscape.

Great Crested Newts

There are recent records of great crested newts within 250m of the location of the new bird hide and although the on-site habitats provide limited shelter for this species the landscape surrounding provides suitable commuting and foraging opportunities. Great crested newts could be present within the habitat which will be affected by the construction of the new bird hide and access track.

Reptiles

The areas of the site where the bird hide and access track will be constructed are suitable for common reptile species such as slow worm *Anguis fragilis* and grass snake *Natrix helvetica*.

Nesting Birds

There is no habitat within the boundaries of the site which could be used by nesting birds. Adjacent hedgerows could be used by nesting birds between March and August (inclusive).

Hedgehog

The site supports suitable habitat for hedgehogs to use when commuting and foraging through the wider landscape at night.

LEGISLATION

Great Crested Newts

Great crested newts are protected under Regulation 41 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 and under Section 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Under this legislation it is an offence to:

- Kill, injure or take a great crested newt;
- Possess a great crested newt (whether alive or dead);
- Take or disturb the eggs of a great crested newt; or
- Destroy or obstruct access to a place of shelter, breeding or protection used by a great crested newt.

Where great crested newts are present within habitats on a development site in England, a licence may be granted by Natural England for works to disturb or damage these areas. Licence applications can only be made once full planning permission has been granted and a suitable mitigation strategy (set out in a detailed Method Statement) forms an essential part of this application process. Works are likely to be seasonally restricted and must be carried out in accordance with the Method Statement agreed with Natural England.

Reptiles

All native reptile species are protected against intentional or reckless killing or injury by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) and the Countryside and Rights of Way Act.

The habitat of the four common species of reptile (common lizard *Zootoca vivipara*, slow worm *Anguis fragilis*, adder *Vipera berus* and grass snake *Natrix natrix*) does not receive additional protection.

Hedgehog

Hedgehogs are a Species of Principal Importance (SoPI) under Section 41 of the NERC Act (2006) and should, as such, be conserved through the planning process. Hedgehogs would also fall under the provisions of the Wild Mammals (Protection) Act, 1996, which prevents certain cruel acts against wild mammals.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Habitats

The site does not lie within or adjacent to any designated, protected or Priority habitats and as the site comprises part of a field of Modified Grassland, including land that has been made up following the construction of the adjacent pond in 2022, the habitats within the site and that will be affected by the proposals have limited intrinsic ecological value.

In order to meet a minimum 10% Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) the Modified Grassland will be retained along the first 135m of the access to the new bird hide and a 1m wide length of grassland to the south of this track will be enhanced. The Modified Grassland that lies along either side of the new access path (30m total length, 0.5m on either side of the track) will also be enhanced, as will the habitat surrounding the new hide. Enhancement in all areas will be through improvement by overseeding with a suitable grass mix (eg. Emorsgate General Purpose Meadow Grass Mixture EG1) to improve the condition of the Modified Grassland to “Good”.

The 0.065Ha of Bare Ground along the existing access track to the east will be retained.

Establishment

The seed mix will be surface sown in autumn or spring into freshly ploughed ground which has been rolled to create a firm surface.

During the first year of establishment the sward will be kept mown to a height less than 15cm to prevent annual weeds establishing. This work will be carried out once the crop exceeds 15cm using hand-held machinery or small mowing machines.

In the event that newly seeded grassland fails to establish, these areas will be lightly scarified and re-seeded with the same species mix. To support establishment, the mowing regime set out above for year 1 may also be required in the second year following planting.

Management

During subsequent years, the grassland will be allowed to flower until the end of August and will then be mown regularly for the rest of the year, in line with supplier recommendations.

Bats

Commuting and Foraging

The on-site habitats are part of a landscape which provides high quality commuting and foraging ground for bats. The proposals will not result in any loss of commuting and foraging habitat and the enhancement of areas of grassland adjacent to the access track will provide improved foraging opportunities.

No lighting is to be installed in or on the new bird hide and so there will be no disturbance to bats moving through the surroundings at night.

Hedgehog

The following steps will be taken to avoid accidental harm to other wildlife (including hedgehog) moving across the site during construction works:

- Any trenches that have to be left open overnight must be adapted so that any animal that falls into it is able to escape, either by leaving a gradient at one end, or placing a structure (such as a plank of wood) in the trench to allow animals to climb out;
- Anything that may present a fire or other hazard (eg. stored chemicals) should be kept securely locked and made inaccessible to wild animals moving around the site at night.

Great Crested Newts

There are recent records of great crested newts within 250m of the location of the new bird hide and the habitat surrounding the site is suitable for them, including for breeding. Given the small scale of the proposals, and the limited suitable on-site habitat for great crested newts, no further surveys for them are recommended and a precautionary approach to construction work is set out below, to protect individual animals from harm.

Reasonable Avoidance Measures (RAMS) Method Statement

The site is considered to have no great crested newt refuge, foraging or hibernation potential, comprising sparse grassland with large areas of bare ground. Whilst the site is in close proximity to a pond which is potentially suitable to support great crested newts, the absence of suitable habitat features within the construction site

reduces the likelihood of great crested newts entering the site and being impacted upon by the development proposals.

Without the implementation of RAMS, the impacts of the proposals for this site on great crested newts would be negligible/low and impacts might include individuals becoming trapped in footings or seeking refuge under materials stored on the ground. If RAMS are implemented, these risks are removed and the impact on great crested newts is predicted to be negligible. On completion of works the site and habitat surrounding the new bird hide will remain suitable for great crested newts to use throughout the year for commuting, foraging, breeding and hibernation.

Precautionary Measures

The following steps will ensure that great crested newts and their habitats are not adversely affected by the proposed works:

- All site personnel will receive a tool-box talk during their site induction to include details of the potential presence of great crested newts and what to do in the event they are found during works on site.
- Materials will be delivered and stored in an area of the site which is already hard standing or on an area of close-mown grassland.
- Where materials will be stored on grass, the grass around the stored items will be kept strimmed throughout development work to prevent suitable habitat for great crested newts growing up around them.
- Stored items will be raised off the ground (whether stored on grass or hard standing) on pallets to remove any refuge potential for great crested newts.
- Aggregates such as gravel and sand will be delivered in bulk bags and stored on pallets to remove any refuge potential for great crested newts.
- There will be no storage of any materials directly on the ground.

Avoiding Unlawful Capture

Great crested newts could become trapped in footings or other excavations if the following precautions are not taken:

- Footings are to be excavated and back-filled during the same day or, if this is not feasible, earth ramps must be left in the trench to allow great crested newts to climb out easily. Boarding must be placed over any holes which are to be left open overnight to stop great crested newts falling into the holes and becoming trapped.



Great crested newts can become trapped in holes if they are left uncovered overnight.

- The contractor must inspect the site each morning to ensure that great crested newts are not trapped in any excavations or holes. It is recommended that one member of site personnel has responsibility for carrying out this check every morning before any works on site commence. A powerful torch will be required when checking holes and crevices for signs of newts becoming trapped.
- If great crested newts are found during the search, work must stop and not continue until Stark Ecology Ltd (01985 840836 or 07980 508092) have been contacted for advice on how to proceed.

Reptiles

The site supports potentially suitable habitat for common reptile species such as slow worm. No surveys for reptiles have been carried out but their potential presence in the habitat within the site boundaries is assumed. Details set out above to protect great crested newts from harm during construction will also protect reptiles from accidental harm during construction.

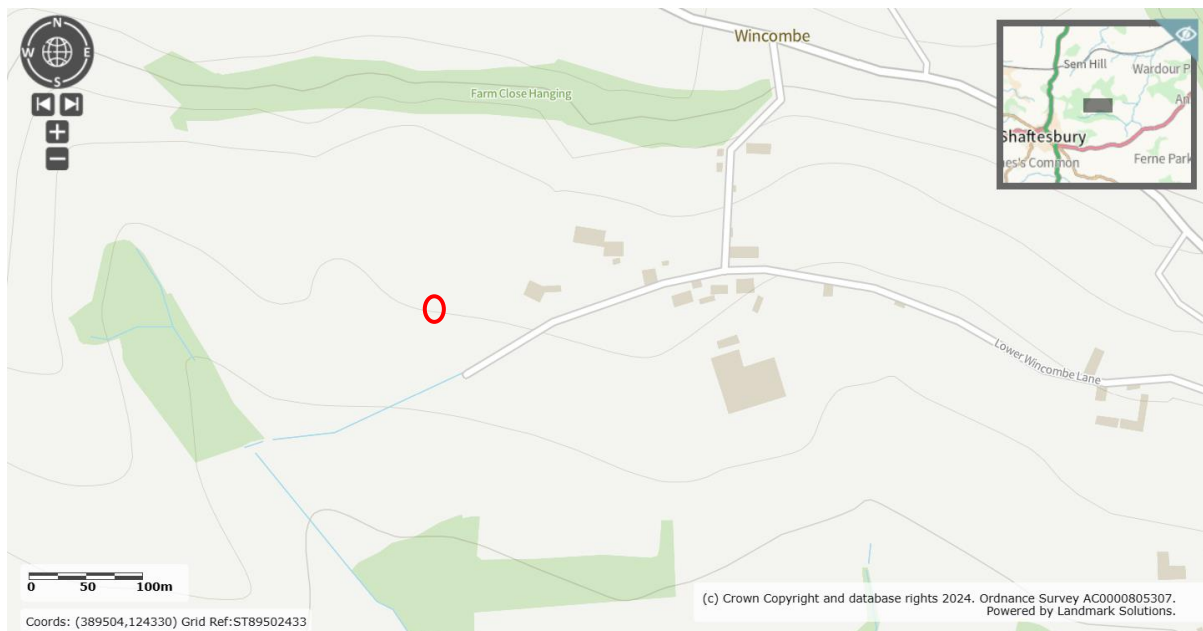
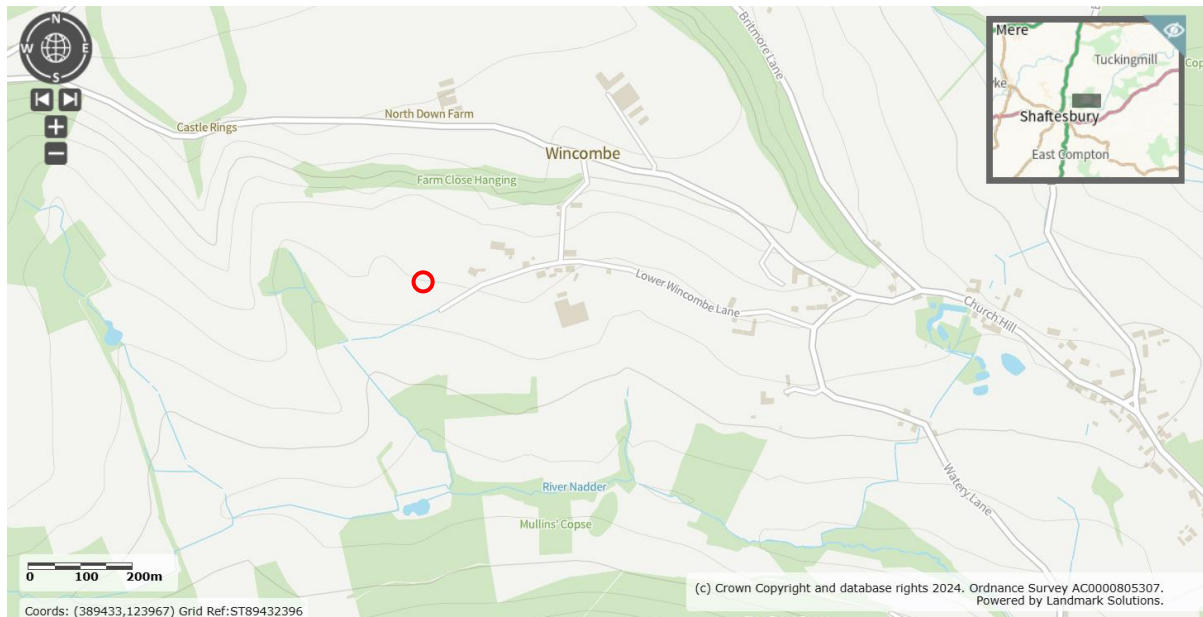
REFERENCES

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Guidelines for Preliminary Ecological Appraisal. 2nd Edition. Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM). December 2017.

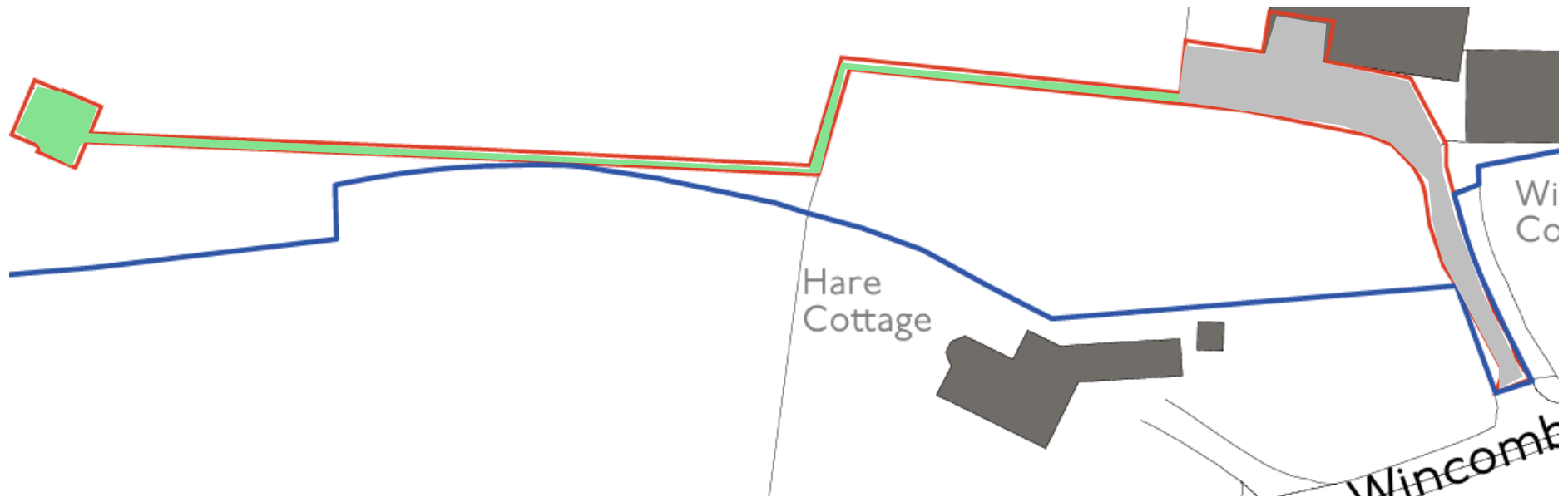
UKHabs Ltd (2023). UK Habitat Classification Version 2.0 (at <https://www.ukhab.org>)

APPENDIX 1: SITE MAP



NB: The new pond which was created in 2022 is not yet shown on maps or aerial photographs of this area.

Baseline Habitat Map



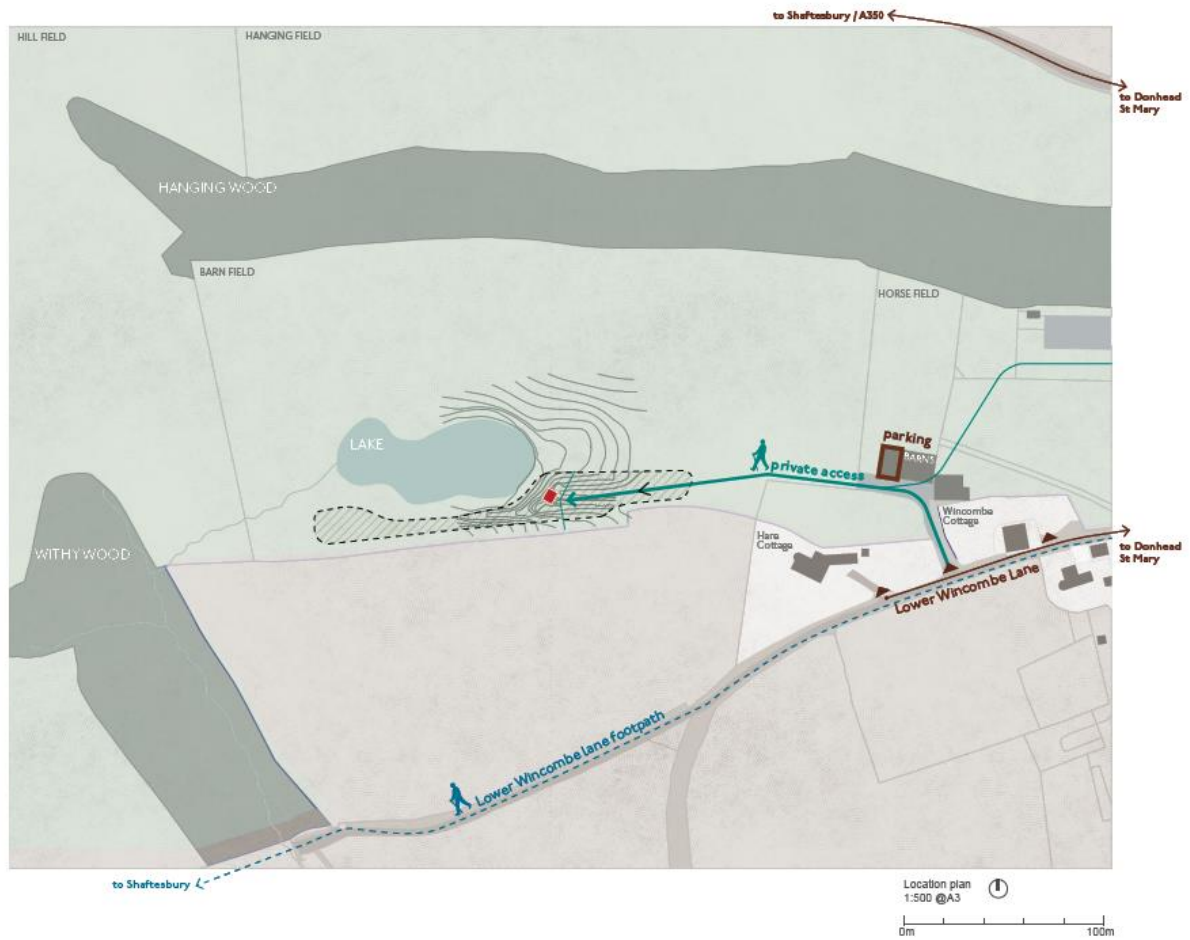
Key

-  Red line planning boundary
-  Modified Grassland (Poor Condition)
-  Bare Ground (Poor Condition)

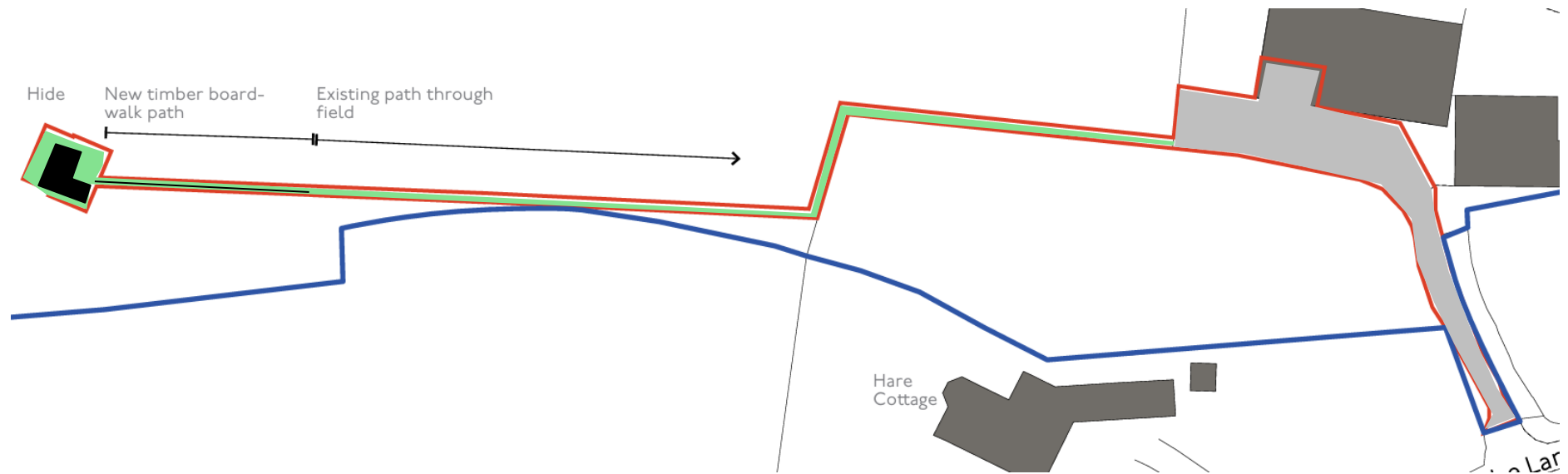


Proposed Layout

Excerpt from the Design and Access Statement.



Proposed Habitat Map



Key

- Red line planning boundary
- Modified Grassland (to be managed for Good Condition)
- Bare Ground (Poor Condition)
- Access track laid over grassland
- New bird hide