Overview
BSG Ecology has assisted West Cumbria Mining in securing planning permission for a new deep mine and processing facility, near Whitehaven, Cumbria.

We provided wide-ranging support to the project; coordinating detailed consultation and survey work and drawing together technical information from various disciplines to provide a robust evidence base for both the Ecological Impact Assessment and shadow Habitats Regulations Assessment for the site. The development will bring significant benefits to the economy, through jobs and investment, and will also result in considerable biodiversity gain through the creation of species-rich grassland and other habitats.

Challenges
There were various significant ecological challenges that needed to be addressed if the proposals were to achieve planning consent. These included potential impacts on the Solway Firth Special Protection Area (pSPA) (a proposed extension of the Upper Solway Flats and Marshes SPA) and impacts on ancient woodland on the route of the conveyor, as well as the loss of open habitat mosaic of brownfield land from within the footprint of the main site.

The approach to addressing these challenges involved structured consultation with Natural England, RSPB and the Cumbria Wildlife Trust, as well as with the planning consultants and legal representatives working on behalf of Cumbria County Council. This ensured all viewpoints were considered and a robust ecological evidence base gathered to address concerns. A wide-ranging programme of botanical, bird, protected (animal) species and invertebrate survey and desk study was implemented, and key ecological features identified.

This survey and desk study resulted in the identification of the open habitat mosaic of brownfield land and the ancient woodland as key ecological features within the footprint of the site (and ancillary infrastructure), and also identified that it supported roosting and loafing herring gulls. These birds potentially formed part of the supporting assemblage of the proposed Solway Firth SPA, meaning the value of the site as habitat to pSPA bird populations needed to be assessed. A further potentially significant issue concerned the potential impact on pSPA seaduck populations from changes to noise and vibration levels, water temperature and chemical properties of the sea water as a result of discharges via a marine outfall.

Solution
To inform the Ecological Impact Assessment and Habitats Regulations Assessment for the site, BSG Ecology collated and interpreted data collected by various technical experts (mining engineers, air quality, hydrology, marine noise and vibration consultants), as well as ecological survey and desk study data to demonstrate that the integrity of the Solway Firth pSPA would not be affected as a result of the development.

Botanical and invertebrate survey work established that the open mosaic habitat of brownfield land was rapidly succeeding to less valuable and species rich scrub habitat, while wider protected species survey recorded few notable species other than brown hare and a small number of ground-nesting birds of conservation concern. Routeing the conveyor under an area of ancient woodland at a location where it was in very poor condition (mainly bramble scrub) allowed impacts to be minimised, with the soil retained to allow reinstatement.

Outcome
The consent covers the main mine site, which will allow the extraction of approximately 2.5 million tonnes of metallurgical coal each year, and a conveyor linked to a new railhead to allow distribution. The coal will be processed on site, avoiding the need for overseas transport for refinement ahead of use in the UK and European steel industry. The high grade of the coking coal will result in greater efficiency in steel production and reduced emissions from steelworks. It is estimated that 1,000 jobs will be created as a result of the development (through employment at the plant and in the supply chain), significantly benefitting the local economy.

The development will also deliver wide ranging biodiversity gain through the creation of considerable areas of species rich grassland and the reinstatement and management of ancient woodland; a habitat management plan will be implemented to maximise the nature conservation value of these initiatives. As a result of the detailed pre-submission consultation work, there were no objections or concerns raised by nature conservation consultees with regard to the proposals at the planning stage.

Client Feedback
West Cumbria Mining said “WCM were consistently impressed with BSG Ecology - their expertise, pragmatism, and responsiveness exceeded our expectations. We would definitely recommend them.”