

Project Profile

Ullswater Heights Leisure Park, Cumbria: Delivery Of A Mitigation Strategy for a large Great Crested Newt Population

Overview

BSG Ecology provided support to Leisure Resorts Ltd (and a previous landowner), allowing them to overcome complex great crested newt licensing issues during the build out of the Ullswater Heights Holiday Park, near Penrith, Cumbria. We agreed a way forward through discussion with Natural England, allowing a mitigation license to be secured and construction to be completed.

The project is now operational and has demonstrably delivered conservation gain to great crested newt alongside the creation of a range of other high-quality semi-natural habitats. The operational site, which contains over one hundred luxury lodges and a secluded Glamping Village, is of considerable importance to the local economy, having created numerous jobs, helped sustain local businesses, and is providing a local tourism hub.

Challenge

BSG was initially engaged to resolve complex great crested newt licensing matters that had arisen during the construction of Ullswater Heights (located in what was a former limestone quarry). It had become clear that the size of the newt population was considerably larger than baseline surveys had predicted, and that greater levels of mitigation and compensation would be required than had been proposed. These needed to include the preparation of a species-specific Habitat Management Plan. The challenge was to work closely with the landowner and engage with Natural England to agree and implement a great crested newt mitigation solution that would allow a license to be achieved for the work and the project to be built out to a demanding timeframe.

Solution

Consultation and negotiation with Natural England resulted in the agreement of a reasonable and proportionate approach to the capture and exclusion of great crested newts and other amphibians from the construction footprint. Alongside this the Habitat Management Plan provided the necessary detail to satisfy Natural England that the favourable conservation status of the newt population could be maintained through a sympathetic land management approach. In combination this allowed a great crested newt mitigation licence to be secured.

Habitat management involved the enhancement of an existing receptor site through the provision of high quality hibernacula, created using existing materials from within the site. Working with the complex hydrology and geology of the site it was possible to create three new ponds to complement an existing wildlife pond. Significantly, a 150 m long by 5 m high screening bund was constructed. This feature houses a bespoke 'mega-hibernacula' within its interior, and was designed to compensate for loss of high quality hibernating habitat within the former quarry.

Following the licence being secured, BSG coordinated and delivered the capture and exclusion of amphibians from the site, with assistance from suitably experienced site personnel who were trained in handling and

identification of the amphibians. Approximately 500 great crested newt and over 1,000 other amphibians, including smooth newt, common toad and common frog were translocated, enabling construction work to take place.

Outcome

The site became fully operational in 2019.

Monitoring in 2020 resulted in a peak count of 200 great crested newts across the ponds at the site; making it one of the largest populations in Cumbria. The same area also supports a large population of common toad, a priority species. Wider biodiversity gain has been achieved through the creation of high quality grassland habitats, woodland and scrub across much of the site; objectives for these habitats have been set through the implementation of the Habitat Management Plan.

The most pleasing outcome of the development is that the operators see the biodiversity value of their site as an asset, and something to be celebrated. This is reflected in their website material, on-site interpretation panels, and in the fact that their Operations Manager (OM) recently achieved his great crested newt survey license. The license was secured as a result of training provided by BSG Ecology and Field Studies Council; it will allow the OM to make practical on the ground decisions and provide advice to his staff when newts are found during the course of routine operations.

Client Feedback

"Working with BSG since we took over the Ullswater Heights (formerly Silver Howe) has been a great experience. Having always had a passion for wildlife from a young age, our CEO chose me to oversee the whole project, coordinating the great crested newt mitigation including maintaining the exclusion fence and establishing new ponds and connected habitats to enhance the site for amphibians and other wildlife. BSG has provided a fantastic level of professional advice throughout, knowing when to step back allowing me to get on with routine activities, and when to get their hands dirty for more complex projects such as pond creation. BSG are passionate and authoritative in the work they do, keeping us well informed on legal implications concerning great crested newts and steering us through the licensing process. Dr Jim Fairclough is the licenced ecologist and manages the project for BSG. Soon we built a great working relationship, providing me with the confidence that he is extremely competent in delivery of great crested newt mitigation projects and is dedicated to achieving good outcomes that benefit the species, whilst allowing construction phases to progress as planned. The professional guidance that BSG have given to this project is without a doubt second to none. We look forward to future development of ongoing projects with BSG."

Paul Dixon - Operations Manager - Leisure Resorts