

**GWERNYDD PENBRE
SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST**



YOUR SPECIAL SITE AND ITS FUTURE

‘Your Special Site and its Future’ is part of our commitment to improve the way we work with SSSI owners and occupiers. In it, we try to explain what is special about the wildlife on your site, and what care is needed to look after its wildlife into the future.

All SSSIs are considered to be of national importance and we recognise the crucial role that owners and occupiers play in their management and protection. We will look to your views and knowledge to help safeguard this important site.

We hope that you will find ‘Your Special Site and its Future’ interesting and helpful. Please contact us if there is anything about the site and its management that you would like to discuss.

What is ‘special’ about the wildlife at Gwernydd Penbre SSSI?

- Gwernydd Penbre has 5 special features.

Reedbeds – This is one of the larger reedbeds in Wales and this habitat supports a variety of specialist birds and insects – birds such as the reed warbler and bittern and many different species of moth such as various ‘wainscots’. Reedbeds used to be more common, but have declined drastically in the past decades due to drainage and intensive agriculture. The waterlogged ditches are also invaluable, supporting rare plants such as frogbit and many dragonflies.

Marshy grassland – The damp ‘rush pastures’ at Gwernydd Penbre are rich in plant species, with uncommon plants such as marsh lousewort and even rarities such as the marsh pea (here at one of only two Welsh sites).

Willow ‘carr’ – The wet woodland that develops amongst the reedbeds is termed ‘carr’ and it is typically dominated by willow and alder. The old wood supports uncommon invertebrates and the damp leafy litter on the ground is a favourite feeding area for another special feature of the SSSI, the Cetti’s warbler.

Cetti’s warbler – is a resident warbler (most species of warbler migrate away to avoid winter cold). It has only colonised southern Britain in the last 30 years, perhaps due to climate change. There are a minimum of 3 pairs of this normally elusive warbler at Gwernydd Penbre, its presence betrayed only by its very loud and distinctive song.

The **invertebrate community** – The invertebrates (insects, spiders and others) at Gwernydd Penbre include many local uncommon and rare species of beetles, flies, moths and dragonflies, all of which depend on the various habitats listed above.

What do we want Gwernydd Penbre SSSI to look like?

The following is a description of how we would like to see the features at Gwernydd Penbre SSSI.

It is important to recognise that all sections, even if they are in different ownership/usage, have elements of the different habitats in varying proportions.

Reedbeds – the main bulk of the reedbeds are in the Wildlife Trust holding, though there are increasing amounts in the northern and western sections of the SSSI. The reedbed habitat will have a varying structure, ranging from extensive areas of dense reeds to more open, seasonally grazed areas at the margins (young reed is palatable to livestock when young and green in spring). Other reedbed areas will include water-filled ditches (crucial for water voles, dragonflies, bittern and various floating water plants), and patches of willow scrub (‘carr’). Small quantities of willow or other scrub are vital for the Cetti’s warbler or as feeding or ‘song’ posts for other birds. This willow scrub must not be allowed to spread to more than 10% of the main reedbed area – about 5% would be ideal.

Apart from the scarce or rare plants (such as frogbit) that are found in the ditches, the very rare marsh pea occurs in one particular area where cattle (or horse) grazing prevents domination by reeds – growing in an interface between reeds and the next habitat, marshy grassland. Just scattered reed plants are present here amongst meadowsweet, marsh birds-foot trefoil and marsh marigold.

Marshy Grassland – the main block of marshy grassland occurs in the south-eastern field, though there are also areas of this habitat in all the other sections of the SSSI, interspersed with reeds and willow carr. Grazing prevents the reversion to pure reedbed. On the marshy grassland the vegetation comprises various species of grass and stands of rush with scatterings of flowering plants such as skullcap, yellow loosestrife and whorled caraway, ragged robin and marsh thistle.

The ‘carr’ (wet scrub of willow and alder) mainly occurs along the old canal/footpath and the old mineral line, though there are areas where carr is increasing, particularly along the eastern half of the Wildlife Trust holding and small scatterings elsewhere. The oldest area of carr lies alongside the canal and contain much old timber and deadwood – invaluable for various insects and birds as indicated in the ‘reedbed’ section above, there is also young carr colonising the reedbed areas. These carr areas occupy less than about 5% of the reedbed area, though existing carr areas, particularly the older carr alongside the old canal, remain.

What management is needed at Gwernydd Penbre and why?

Although Gwernydd Penbre is an excellent place for wildlife it will only remain so if the necessary management continues or is reinstated on parts of the SSSI and CCW will endeavor to work with owners and occupiers to safeguard the special features that are present.

What does this mean in practice?

Some management is essential to conserve the special features. Other management actions could damage the features within a very short time. These we regard as the most important:

Grazing – Grazing will be required in at least 3 sections of the SSSI – the southern strip (near the main road); the eastern and south eastern section of the Wildlife Trust reserve, (where the marsh pea occurs) and also (perhaps less frequently) in the western section. Normally these fields will be grazed by cattle (and very rarely horses) when ground conditions allow, usually in the drier summer-autumn months. In some years, the marshy grassland (in conjunction with some drier areas) is **cut for hay**. This variation of grazing with occasional hay cutting is to be encouraged.

Scrub Control – A limited amount of scrub control will be required in order to prevent domination of the reedbed areas by willow ‘carr’. Of course, it should be remembered that some scattered scrub – as well as pre-existing more continuous blocks that should be retained – is vital for Cetti’s warblers and other species. Areas of more-or-less continuous scrub, which should be retained, are shown on the map, as are areas of scattered scrub. The scrub should be hand cut and the stumps treated with

herbicide. Material can be left on site and care should be taken not to open up the ground layer, exposing it to wind-blown seed.

The few individual shrubs and trees of rare or scarce species e.g. black poplar and alder buckthorn should be retained both for their intrinsic and linked benefits the black poplar is a local Carmarthenshire `Biodiversity Action Plan` (BAP) species, of landscape as well as ecological value; likewise alder buckthorn is valuable as the food plant of the local brimstone butterfly. These are located on the edge of the site away from any proposed management noted above.

Ditch Systems – These provide a habitat for certain scarce plants such as frogbit, for invertebrates such as dragonflies and mammals such as water vole. A cyclic pattern of cleaning out every 3-5 years to provide open water would be beneficial; the periodicity might have to be determined by inspection.

Fertilisers and other chemicals – should not be used at Gwernydd Penbre as these might damage the delicate flora and fauna at the site. An exception is the herbicides used for stump treatment, and prior written consent from CCW is needed for this.

Finally

Our knowledge and understanding of wildlife is continually improving. It is possible that new issues may arise in the future, whilst other issues may disappear. This statement is written with the best information we have now, but may have to change in the future as our understanding improves. Any information you can provide on the wildlife of your site, its management and its conservation would be much appreciated.

If you would like to discuss any aspect of your SSSI, or have any concerns about your SSSI, please contact your local CCW office.

Your local office is;

**Countryside Council for Wales
Beechwood Office
Talley Road
Llandeilo
Carmarthenshire
SA19 7HR**

Tel.: 01558 825800

Fax: 01558 823467