

**CYNGOR CEFN GWLAD CYMRU  
COUNTRYSIDE COUNCIL FOR WALES**

**SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST CITATION**

**POWYS**

**AFON WYSG (ISAFONYDD)  
RIVER USK (TRIBUTARIES)**

**Date of Notification:** 2003

**National Grid Reference:**

SN 892260	SN927250
SN910330	SN960285
SN950337	SN994340
SO010270	SO033340
SO067267	SO070257
SO110224	SO177230
SO246198	

**O.S. Maps:**

1:50,000 Sheet number:	160 & 161
1:10,000 Sheet number:	SN82SE, NE, SN83SE SN92SW, NW, SE, NE SN93 SW, NW, SE, NE SO02NW, NE SO03SW, NW, SE SO11NE SO12SW, SE, NE SO21NW SO22 SW, NW, SE, NE

**Site Area:** 184.0 ha

**Description:**

**River Usk**

The Usk system, comprising the River Usk and including its upper tributaries, represents a large, linear ecosystem that acts as an important wildlife corridor, an essential migration route and key breeding area for many nationally and internationally important species. The Usk is of special interest as a fine example of a river running over sandstones and for its associated plant and animal communities. Its character spans a wide range of types from an upland base-poor stream to a large lowland river with extensive tidal reaches. Its overall diversity is a product of its geology, soil types, adjacent land-use and hydrology.

The River Usk is one of the largest rivers in Wales. From its source to its confluence, the main channel is over 120 kilometres long, and drains a catchment of 1358 square km. Rising at an altitude of 500 metres on Mynydd Du on the Carmarthenshire/Powys border, the Usk flows eastwards below the northern scarp of the Brecon Beacons, turning south below Abergavenny and meandering down through Monmouthshire to its confluence with the Severn Estuary below

Newport.

### River Usk Tributaries

The site is of special interest for its internationally important populations of otter *Lutra lutra*, Atlantic salmon *Salmo salar*, bullhead *Cottus gobio*, brook lamprey *Lampetra planeri* and river lamprey *Lampetra fluviatile*. These species thrive in the largely un-modified streams and medium sized rivers that comprise the Usk Tributaries.

The majority of the tributaries support aquatic plant communities typical of moderately nutrient rich waters, including some where water crowfoot *Ranunculus* spp. are prominent. Extensive areas of semi-natural riparian habitats can still be found next to the tributaries. These include semi-natural woodland, dry and marshy grassland, stands of tall fen and marsh vegetation and gravel banks. The site also includes back channels and oxbows that support otters and waterfowl and provide valuable refuges for small fish and invertebrates in times of flood.

The site includes the Crai, Senni, Cilieni, Camlais, Nant Bran, Ysgir, Tarell, Honddu, Cynrig, Nant Menasgin, Caerfanell, Rhiangoll and Grwyne. The upper Usk catchment comprises the southern flanks of Mynydd Epynt, northern scarp of the Brecon Beacons (including the Mynydd Du, Fforest Fawr and Mynydd Llangynidr/Llangatwg) and the southern slopes of the Black Mountains, as well as the valley of the Usk itself, extending from Usk Reservoir to Abergavenny in the east. Most of the tributaries rise on the mountain slopes mentioned above at altitudes ranging from 320m to 760m above sea level. They flow either northwards or southwards to join the main channel of the Usk at various points between Trecastle and Glangrwyney. Most of this catchment comprises upland pasture, conifer forests or enclosed agricultural land, with significant areas of permanent pasture, broadleaved woodland and other semi-natural vegetation but there are also some built up areas such as around Brecon, Crickhowell and Sennybridge.

The tributaries flowing south to the Usk from Mynydd Epynt, cross outcrops of green and red Silurian (Pridoli) sandstones, forming a syncline, which strikes from NE to SW, passing through Merthyr Cynog. South-east of this is a complex, faulted anticline, with Silurian (Ludlow) siltstones and sandstones in the core. The fold plunges to the south-west and the Pridoli wraps around the Ludlow rocks in the centre. Downstream, these rivers are developed on the Pridoli red beds, with the Ysgir and Honddu also flowing across the lower beds of the lower Devonian (Dittonian) rocks, before entering the Usk.

The rivers draining north from Mynydd Du and Fforest Fawr, rise in sandstones and conglomerates of the upper Devonian and rapidly descend through the lower Devonian (Breconian) rocks comprising red sandstones of the Brownstone beds and green sandstones of the Senni beds. From the foot of the steep slope of these hills the rivers flow through narrow valleys cut into the sandstone-mudstone-limestone cycles typical of the Dittonian, which form a medium height, dissected plateau.

The Cynrig and Nant Menasgin also rise in the Plateau beds of the Upper Devonian and rapidly descend through the lower Devonian Brownstone and Senni beds of the northern scarp of the Brecon Beacons. The Dittonian rocks of this area form a less elevated plateau than those west of the Tarell. This may be due to a decline in the proportion of sandstones in each of the sandstone-mudstone-limestone cycles.

The Cwm Du valley, through which the Rhiangoll flows, is steep at the northern end, where the streams descend rapidly through lower Devonian (Breconian) rocks until they reach a plane of river alluvium.

The rivers that flow south through the Black Mountains rise in the Plateau beds of the upper Devonian and descend rapidly through the lower Devonian (Breconian). At Pen Cerrig Calch, Carboniferous (Dinantian and Namurian) Limestones and quartz sandstones occur.

The upper Usk and its tributaries support one of the strongest populations of otters in England and Wales. This species is threatened by habitat destruction, disturbance and pollution throughout its European range. Otters rely heavily on woodland, scrub and tall bankside vegetation for cover. Their holts can be located on the river bank or in other suitable dense vegetation at some distance from the edge of the river channel.

A range of fish species occurs in the River Usk tributaries. The upper reaches of the Grwyne catchment and much of the lengths of the other tributaries included in this site provide excellent conditions for Atlantic salmon spawning. The majority of salmon spawning for the whole Usk catchment occurs in these streams. In addition, all the tributaries provide good salmon nursery habitat; the correct instream conditions to enable young salmon, at both the fry and parr stage, to thrive. River and brook lamprey have been recorded in many of the tributaries and bullhead are ubiquitous. Other species of fish occur in these tributaries include brown trout *Salmo trutta* grayling *Thymallus thymallus* and stone loach *Noemacheilus barbastulus*.

The site supports a range of breeding birds that are associated with riparian habitats, including grey heron *Ardea cinerea*, common sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*, grey wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*, dipper *Cinclus cinclus*, kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* and goosander *Mergus merganser*. The river and bankside trees support large populations of flying insects, which provide an important food source for bats, including Daubenton's bat *Myotis daubentonii*. The Usk valley between Brecon and Abergavenny supports important populations of lesser horseshoe bat *Rhinolophus hipposideros* and several of the tributaries, including the Grwyne, Rhiangoll and Nant Menasgin are known to provide important feeding areas and sheltered flight lines for this species. White-clawed crayfish *Austropotamobius pallipes* have been recorded in the Caerfanell and Honddu.

### **Remarks:**

Afon Wysg (isafonydd)/River Usk (tribuatires) SSSI is part of Afon Wysg /River Usk candidate Special Area of Conservation, being host to the following habitats listed in Annex I, Annex II, Annex IV and Annex V of the EC Habitats Directive: (Directive 92/43/EEC on the Conservation of Natural habitats and of Wild Fauna and Flora).

‘Rivers with floating vegetation often dominated by water-crowfoot’ - Annex I

‘Common otter’ - Annex II and IV

‘Atlantic salmon’ - Annex II and V

‘Bullhead’ - Annex II

‘River lamprey’ - Annex II and V

‘Brook lamprey’ - Annex II

‘White-clawed crayfish’ - Annex II and IV

‘Lesser Horseshoe bat’ – Annex II and IV

Otter, white-clawed crayfish and lesser horseshoe bat are also listed in Schedule 5 of the Wildlife

and Countryside Act, 1981 (as amended).

The site is partly within the Brecon Beacons National Park.

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