

My name is Michael McCarrick and I was a Mammal Recorder for the Bedfordshire Natural History Society 2000-2007 and have been a Dormouse Monitor for Maulden Wood, Bedfordshire from 2001 to the present day. I have also been an active member of the Bedfordshire Badger Group since 1990 and have been involved with artificial setts, surveying and monitoring and exclusion of badgers inline with Natural England licensing.

I have visited the proposed GA2 site (land North of Great Ashby) on a number of occasions since 2017 in connection with identifying evidence of Hazel Dormice within the area as well as badger activity. Numbers of dormice have been decreasing drastically over the years and this is also the situation within Hertfordshire where numbers are now so low it is great cause for concern.

On my earlier visit during the month of December 2017, I was particularly concerned in regards to the use of nesting tubes to identify dormice within the area. A number of ecologists do not feel that these are efficient in obtaining accurate information and I tend to agree with this opinion based on my experience as a Dormouse Monitor. We used nesting tubes within Maulden Wood (where dormice were re-introduced) to establish presence but results were inconclusive with no dormice found; we also used particular nesting boxes at the same time in areas of the woodland which resulted in 2 juveniles and an adult; we have since then had excellent results using these particular boxes. My other concern with regards to the nesting tubes in the GA2 proposed site was the positioning of them. I observed a number of tubes that were at 45 degree angles with many attached to flimsy branches and numerous tubes on the floor of the woodland. Dormouse nest tubes are only suitable over a short period of time.

I attended the site during the Autumn period of 2019 to inspect a few of the woodlands and hedgerows; in particular Nine Acre Wood, Brooches Wood and New Spring Wood and the thick hedgerow between Brooches Wood and Nine Acre Wood. I collected a number of hazelnuts from these areas although it was very difficult to access the area under the pylons in New Spring Wood due to the thick brambles and foliage. On studying the hazelnuts, I can confirm that two had the appearance of having been opened by a Hazel Dormouse. Dormice live in considerably low densities, but the fact that they have previously been recorded within the area, this latest observation would suggest that a very small number are still residing within GA2.

Considering their importance as a declining species; development should not be considered within the area around New Spring Wood, Brooches Wood or the hedgerow between Nine Acre Wood and Brooches Wood as this would have serious implications. It would be far more beneficial to improve the habitat in and around the woodlands as well as maintaining hedgerows and filling in any gaps to improve connectivity. As taken from <https://www.acerecology.co.uk/why-are-hazel-dormice-endangered/> "Hazel Dormice in the UK are a protected species. They are very rare and vulnerable to extinction, which has caused them to become a priority species in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan, as well as being protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. In 2017, the population plummeted by 72% within the last 25 years."

In regards to badgers; there is a serious amount of activity within and around this proposed site and this would have serious implications not only for the protected species but also for those residing within the area. There are numerous setts – main, subsidiary and outliers, foraging areas and territory latrines in 4 of the woodlands and 3 of the hedgerows. Badgers will not change their habits due to a development although they can be displaced to another sett for a certain amount of time – the consequences of going ahead with GA2 could lead to tunnelling under roadways and would definitely result in badgers digging under boundary fences/walls and using residents' gardens as their foraging ground; I have seen entire lawns dug up as well as tunnelling under patios, conservatories, sheds and garages; this can lead to severe conflict. I have also visited numerous schools within Bedfordshire where badgers have tunnelled under buildings; this can lead to extensive costs particularly if badgers have to be excluded and artificial setts built.

Regarding the access road to the proposed GA2 site; although I was not able to access all of this area for my dormouse study, in regards to badgers I was able to locate a main sett and subsidiary sett in the location (although I was not able to observe a further outlier sett that had been recorded previously due to brambles etcetera). This access road would have serious complications as it would mean all 3 setts would need to be closed. Although fairly easy to get an outlier sett closed, closing a main sett is not taken on board lightly; a full licence would have to be applied for and approved but to do this an artificial sett would need to be provided in a suitable area with foraging ground which is not within another clan's territory but in that clan's territory. From having observed territory latrines between the badgers within the access road area and those inhabiting Nine Acre Wood – would suggest this is an entirely separate clan. During one of my visits to the area; I also surveyed New Spring Wood and the meadow further west – the wood was very damp and the meadow flooded, therefore certainly not suitable conditions for an artificial sett which is why there is a distinct lack of badgers west of Brooches Wood. This would therefore raise the question – where would an artificial sett be located? Having been involved with badgers for the last 30 years as well as exclusions and artificial setts – the only logical option that I can see would be to move the access road.

Taking into account the likelihood that there is still a very small population of Hazel Dormice as well as an extensive amount of badger setts, tunnels, activity – I would suggest that this particular development site is re-considered as no roadways or housing should be built in the area adjacent to the proposed access road, Brooches Wood, Nine Acre Wood or the mature hedgerows inbetween Brooches Wood and Nine Acre Wood and leading out to the east from Nine Acre Wood.

Michael McCarrick
14/09/20