

David Bell

ECOS Countryside Services

Summary Precognition

Golf & Leisure Resort

Menie Estate, Balmedie, Aberdeenshire



Public Inquiry

SUMMARY PRECOGNITION OF DAVID BELL

ORNITHOLOGY PROTECTED AND OTHER SPECIES

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 I hold the Degree of Bachelor of Science from Aberdeen University. I am currently principal of ECOS Countryside Services (ECOS), an ecological consultancy I established in 1987 specialising in field survey and evaluation and a core area of work is in Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA).
- 1.2 The views given in this evidence are those of a consultant with a remit to undertake an impartial EIA on the likely implications of the proposed Trump International Golf Development at Menie, Aberdeenshire.

2.0 Scope of Precognition

- 2.1 The scope of my evidence will be restricted to the description of baseline conditions, evaluation and assessment of birds, protected mammal species and other species in relation to the proposed Menie Golf Development.
- 2.2 I will describe the key interests in relation to ornithology, protected species and other species and will provide an evaluation of their importance.
- 2.3 I will focus on the key conservation species likely to be adversely affected by the proposed golf development as described in the masterplan submitted to Aberdeenshire Council and will comment on the revised Hawtree course layout.
- 2.4 I will assess the likely effects of the Menie development and discuss options for mitigation.
- 2.5 Finally I will provide an overview of the opportunities for medium to long-term enhancement for ornithological, protected species and other biological interests through active management.

3.0 Protected species

- 3.1 I undertook site-specific surveys for badger (CDG3), great crested newts (CDG3), otter (CDG3) and water vole (CDG3) in 2006 and repeated the surveys for badger (CDG1), otter (CDG1) and water vole (CDG1) during the early part of 2007. A repeat survey was recommended due to boundary changes.
- 3.2 These surveys were undertaken at the appropriate times of year and used standard methodologies agreed with SNH in advance of surveys.
- 3.3 No signs of great crested newt were recorded during my surveys and this concurs with data held by the local biological records centre (NEBreaSC) and the results of the national great crested newt survey undertaken in 1996.
- 3.4 Both otter surveys found regular signs of use of watercourses, ornamental ponds at Menie House, Menie Flight Pond and the Blairton Flight Ponds. The most frequently recorded signs were spraints (droppings) and footprints along the lower Blairton Burn and its outfall. No holt or rest area was found within the survey area, which extended beyond the site boundary, by up to 500m, however a holt was located to the north of the site on the Drum Links. Clearly the site is within the home range of local otter but it does not appear to be important for breeding. Otter have recovered from serious population decline with the latest national survey recording a very high occupancy, 92%, and otter now have a favourable conservation status in Scotland. On the basis of these surveys and recommended mitigation in the Environmental Statement (ES) SNH withdrew an earlier objection and agreed that the golf development was unlikely to have a significant adverse effect on the local otter populations.
- 3.5 I undertook surveys for water vole in 2006 and 2007 recording no signs of this species, again this concurred with data held by NEBreaSC.

3.6 I undertook badger surveys in 2006 and 2007 recording a significant presence that included a main sett, annex sett and outliers. Foraging areas were mapped and advice taken from Grampian Badger Group. Further data was provided by NEBreaSC and adjacent surveys to inform routing options for the A90 at Menie. SNH agreed that there was unlikely to be a significant adverse effect on badger if mitigation measures detailed in the ES were provided as a Badger Protection Plan.

3.7 Site specific bat surveys were conducted by Bat Services (CDG3) and Dr Sue Swift (CDG3). These surveys looked at the wider area of the proposed site and buildings at Menie House. Small numbers of two species of Pipistrelle bat recorded foraging and roosting at Menie House and foraging around other farmsteads and plantations in the wider development site. The conclusion of surveys being that the golf course development would not pose a significant risk to bats. Recommendations were made for improving connectivity of habitats used by bats and to improve the foraging value of the area for bats.

4.0 Birds

Breeding Birds

4.1 I undertook breeding bird surveys in 2006 (CDG3), which were again repeated in 2007 (CDG6) to take account of development boundary changes. These surveys followed a methodology agreed with SNH in advance of surveys and the one most appropriate for the site and its potential bird interest.

4.2 Both breeding bird surveys recorded similar numbers of bird species, 56 in 2006 and 57 in 2007. In 2006 twenty two species were recorded as breeding whilst the number in 2007 was twenty three species.

4.3 All possible, probable and proved breeding bird species in each year were evaluated for their conservation importance. There were no Annex 1 EC Birds Directive or Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (& later amendments) or

Schedule 1 breeding birds. Some species were present in national and local Biodiversity Action Plans (T47, T48, T49, T57 CDF8) and a total of nine Red List Species of High Conservation Concern were recorded.

- 4.4 These Red List and priority action biodiversity species were: common linnet; common starling; corn bunting; grasshopper warbler; house sparrow; reed bunting; sky lark; song thrush; and yellowhammer.
- 4.5 The most numerous breeding key species was sky lark with breeding numbers in the range 40-80 pairs in 2006 and 23-60 pairs in 2007. Other species were recorded in much lower numbers with house sparrow and common linnet the only species exceeding 10 pairs in either year.
- 4.6 Both breeding survey reports assess the quality of bird habitat according to national guidelines used for assessment of SSSI and found that the sand-dune habitats were of highest quality with a score of 20 out of 24. The figure of 24 being the SSSI qualifying threshold for identifying a nationally important assemblage. The lowland damp grassland, lowland open water and scrub were of lower importance.
- 4.7 The ES collates the available data (T48, T56) in addition to site surveys it addresses potential impacts on seven of these species as neither yellowhammer nor grasshopper warbler were recorded at the time of writing. This is not a significant omission as they were recorded in low breeding numbers, one and two pairs respectively.
- 4.8 The key species and habitat in bird conservation terms are sky lark and sand dune. Sky lark made no use of areas of mobile sand and limited use of yellow dune habitat for breeding. This species showed a clear preference for semi fixed dune, heath and dune grassland for breeding. A hole by hole comparison of habitat losses between the original course layout by Tom Fazio compared to the new Hawtree course layout was carried out by Dr Tom Dargie. This showed a reduction of 3.34 hectares in the original areas lost to the course in terms of semi-fixed dune, dune grassland and heath. The reduction in habitat loss is not sufficient to prevent short-term reductions in

sky lark numbers. Numbers of sky lark will be determined in the medium to long-term by the success of dune habitat mitigation and the Red List bird species actions in the Course Environmental Management Plan (CEMP).

Winter and Passage Birds

- 4.9 I undertook a winter and passage survey of birds using the Menie site and adjacent beach and inshore waters over the period September 2006 to May 2007 (CDG4). The main aim of these surveys was to identify special interest in relation to local European Sites and to record significant species or numbers of species.
- 4.10 A total of 85 resident, passage and wintering species were recorded within a total survey area that extended from Balmedie to the mouth of the River Ythan and was bounded by the A90 and the North Sea.
- 4.11 Locally important numbers of lapwing, golden plover and curlew were recorded, mainly outwith the site.
- 4.12 The key species recorded on-site was pink-footed goose, which were recorded roosting on land to the south of Menie House. The peak count was 3,500 birds or 1.3% of the Greenland/Iceland population. These birds were likely to form part of the flock roosting in the Ythan Estuary, Sands of Forvie and Meikle Loch Special Protection Area (SPA) (GRAMPIAN 222A) to the north. A preliminary assessment was carried out as part of this report.
- 4.13 On the recommendation of SNH a full 'Appropriate Assessment' report has been produced to address the potential recreational disturbance effects on the SPA and to address the issue of the potential loss of a pink-footed goose sub-roost. This additional report is now the subject of an appropriate assessment by the competent authority, the Scottish Ministers.

5.0 Other Species, Invertebrates

- 5.1 An entomology brief was agreed with SNH and as a result four orders were surveyed at Menie in 2007. These were Lepidoptera, Aquatic Coleoptera and Hemiptera, Orthoptera and Terrestrial Coleoptera and Hemiptera.
- 5.2 Professor Garth Foster reported on aquatic macro-invertebrates (CDG1) and species interest he recorded included two Nationally Scarce species *Rhantus suturalis* and *Enochrus ochropterus*, the former was a new record for Aberdeenshire. Both were found in one pond close to the 7th hole and not likely to be directly impacted. Data was provided for the 17 sites surveyed and will be used to inform detailed design.
- 5.3 Paul Doyle, Alba Ecology Ltd undertook the surveys of terrestrial orders focusing on a full range of dune habitats likely to support interest. The report (CDG5) recorded no species that were listed in UK or North East Scotland Biodiversity Action Plans, nor any Red Data Book species.
- 5.4 Three species, not rare in the UK context, were identified as declining and particularly sensitive to the changes in habitat due to development. Potentially negative impacts were identified for a total 56 species of invertebrate.
- 5.5 The data from these reports will be used to inform mitigation based on specialist advice at the time of preparing the CEMP.

6.0 Management

- 6.1 The process of mitigation for flora and fauna is limited by the outline nature of the application and opportunities afforded at detailed planning stages will be significant. The opportunities in the medium to long-term could be maximised by the preparation of a Course Environmental Management Plan (CEMP) produced by an impartial and independent group (MEMAG) in accordance with best practice identified in the Scottish Golf Environment Group (SGEG) publications (CDG5, T44, T48). SNH is a lead partner in SGEG providing advice and part funding two permanent posts.

6.2 The guidelines in SGEG publications referenced will be enriched by outside expertise brought in to advise on issues relating to key receptors species, such as Red List birds and protected species. Whilst the aim of the plan would be to retain and enhance existing interest through management and monitoring it would also seek to create new opportunities for wildlife and to underpin national and local biodiversity priorities. This may apply to species previously present at Menie or new ones that could be encouraged to take advantage of new habitat creation and management. The adoption of flagship species e.g. aquatic beetles, bats, barn owl, sky lark, reed bunting, tree sparrow, otter and grayling butterfly, within the CEMP should see targeted action for boundary habitats, wetlands and watercourses, grassland and planting of new broadleaved native woodland. Specialist monitoring through CMEG will endeavour to protect, improve and create lower plant habitats in relevant dune areas. The feasibility of re-introducing water vole at Menie could be one of the more exciting projects.

7.0 Conclusion

The conclusion of the EIA, with regard to birds and protected species, is that the golf course will not, after mitigation, have a significant adverse effect and this has been broadly agreed by SNH, RSPB and SWT in their written responses to Aberdeenshire Council. Invertebrate mitigation will be identified and implemented at detailed design stages and included in the CEMP.