

# The impact of the Olympics for the wildlife of the Lower Lea Valley

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Some members will be familiar with the habitats of the Lower Lea, a classic example of what nature can do with post-industrial dereliction. The constructions of the facilities and car and coach parks for the Olympic Games in 2012 will render its wildlife habitats yet more victims of current approaches to regeneration.

The area designated for the Olympics Games stretches from Stratford High Street in the south to the A12 in the north, and east from the banks of the Lea Navigation, taking in the important habitats of the Old River Lea and Bow Back Rivers Waterways and associated wetlands, as well as parcels of land left over from the Valley's industrial heritage, allotments and public open space and Common Land. Constructing the Olympics Precinct will involve the complete re-landscaping of the area, including lowering towpaths and the creation of huge land bridges. To accommodate this, the area will be totally cleared of

buildings, businesses and wildlife habitat and almost 2 million cubic metres of soil will be moved around the site.

Existing open spaces and habitat that will be lost include rough grassland, scrub, and numerous mature and semi-mature trees. In addition, the complex network of waterways and reedbeds of the River Lea system will be severely impacted. This impact will be long lasting: work is expected to start in 2007 and continue until the Games in 2012. Following this, development will continue until 2020 (a period of 14 years) as facilities are 'reconfigured'. If money is made available, the construction of 'semi-natural' parkland is proposed (the term used by James Purnell, Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport in a Parliamentary debate, November 20th 2005).

The scale of the construction and earth-moving involved will entail the destruction of habitats which are well-recognised as being of

local and national importance for nature conservation. The River Lea system is designated a Site of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation, and is an important passage and migration route for birds. The effect of the land bridges and the tall buildings (the Main Stadium will stand about 50 metres high) will be to virtually culvert the waterways, creating shaded and sterile areas below. This fragmentation of the waterways means the loss of existing continuous 'habitat' corridors, rendering them less attractive for wildlife, as well as for walking and cycling. Within the proposed Precinct are several Sites of Borough Importance for Nature Conservation including the Eastway Cycle Circuit, Bully Point Nature Reserve, Arena Field and the Greenway and Old Ford Nature Reserve - all will be lost under concrete.

These areas are home to species such as bats, common lizard, kingfisher and the nationally-scarce black redstart, which frequents wastelands. All are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). In addition, the extensive areas of sparsely-vegetated and open ground provide valuable habitat for rare and uncommon invertebrates. In 2004 a survey of White Hart Field, for example, recorded over 204 species of invertebrate, including six Red Data Book and 17 nationally-scarce species, including the spectacular Rose Chafer (*Cetonia aurata*), its much smaller relative *Trichius zonatus*, and the UK BAP species, the Brown-banded Carder Bee. White Hart Field will be lost under a land bridge connecting the car and coach park on East Marsh with the Olympics Precinct.



Trees along the bank of the Old River Lea in autumn, including mulberry, Raywood ash, horse chestnut, weeping poplar and willow. Photo: Anne Woollett.



Above: Arena Field, looking south west across grassland and trees of Arena Fields to Lea Navigation with Wick Village, Victorian school and tower blocks of Hackney in the background. Above right: White Hart Field, looking north. Photos: Anne Woollett.



there is a legal obligation for the developers to provide exchange land for Common Land prior to their loss to Olympic developments (recognised in one of the condition; of the Planning Permission) but so far no exchange land and no compensation for loss of trees and other wildlife habitats has been identified.

The more common species such as coot, moorhen, mallard, mute swan, green woodpecker, grey wagtail, great-crested and little grebe, dunnock, house sparrows, tits, sand martin and kestrel offer local people and visitors alike an opportunity to get close to nature. Any proposals to translocate species would apply only to legally-protected species, and not to the many other species whose habitats will also be destroyed.

Of the hundreds of trees that will be lost to the Olympics Precinct are many mature specimens, including 100 year old London planes and a splendid Indian bean tree at the Eastway Cycle Circuit. On East Marsh - 16 hectares of Common Land and part of Hackney Marshes - the construction of a car and coach park and land bridge will destroy more than 350 mature trees including pear, cherry, many varieties of ash, black poplars (including several 110 year old rare native black poplars) and many exotic species such as weeping poplar, mulberry, zelkova and southern beech. Ironically these trees feature in computer-generated Olympics publicity.

These trees provide roosting and nesting sites for birds such as starlings, green woodpeckers,

thrushes and fieldfare, which feed on the open grassland of East Marsh. Gulls and wood pigeon visit East Marsh to feed. The trees also protect the banks of the Old River Lea, home to over-wintering waterfowl such as gadwall, tufted duck and teal, as well as resident birds such as kingfisher, heron, cormorant, and little grebe. The Environmental Impact Assessment did not include the River Lea as it runs along East Marsh.

The parts of Hackney Marshes to be lost to the Olympics Precinct (Arena Field, East Marsh and White Hart Field) are Common Land and

Lea Navigation. View south along towpath with trees and bushes on Arena Field to left, home to a colony of house sparrows. Note marker for Capital Ring Walk. A high fence and loop road will be built along the edge of the towpath. Photo: Anne Woollett.



The LNHS and individual members must hold a large amount of data for the area. Perhaps the Society could create a memorial for the area, which could have become a world-class example of sensitive regeneration working with, rather than against, nature. A document of records of the rich assemblage of species in the Lower Lea Valley will not save the area and its habitats, but would provide testimony of what is about to be lost. And if money is found to fund the new 'parkland', they could serve as 'biodiversity targets'.

Photos of East Marsh trees are at: [www.hackneyenvironment.org.uk](http://www.hackneyenvironment.org.uk)