

Ecological Survey & Wildlife Assessment - Abstract

Winter Wonderland Illuminations

Torphins Wood

Torphins Paths Group ran a popular Christmas illumination project in Torphins Woods in December 2020 and is considering a repeat installation, potentially on an extended route, for December 2021. An ecological survey was commissioned to inform the project development. The survey aim was to establish habitat types, presence (potential or actual) of protected species and provide an assessment of habitat suitability for bats and other wildlife.

The site was surveyed on 24 February 2021 by Landcare NorthEast, a local consultancy specialising in wildlife surveys. The survey area comprised the section of path used for Winter Wonderland in 2020 as well as additional existing path sections under consideration for extending the winter attraction, plus a 30m buffer on each side.

Habitats: The majority of the survey area comprised mature broadleaf plantation woodland, with dominant species beech, silver birch as well as occasional holly, sycamore, rowan and spruce and cypress species. The woodland had a diverse structure, with self-seeded tree saplings and seedlings as well as standing and lying deadwood and brash. Tracts of conifer plantation were present, bordering residential gardens. Understorey was generally sparse, with deep leaf litter and occasional holly. Small stands of rhododendron were recorded.

Wildlife: No field signs of badger, pine marten, otter, water vole and wood ant were observed. Squirrel are known to be foraging in the conifer woodland area. Feeders installed here appeared well used, and chewed cones were observed in several locations. No likely squirrel dreys were noted.

The woodland was noted to contain a rookery, with a number of nests observed high in the canopy, as well as a flock of corvids circling above. A range of other woodland birds were observed, including great tit, robin, blue tit, chaffinch and woodpecker. The woodland had potential to be part of the foraging territory of tawny owl, although the species is unlikely to nest within the survey area due to a scarcity of trees with suitable cavities, and the high level of disturbance by recreational users.

The site offers very limited potential roosting opportunities for bats: mature tree species present typically lack suitable crevices such as rot holes and lifted bark. Foraging habitat is good for bat species.

Evaluation:

- The footprint of the illuminations is relatively small, and follows the route of the existing, well-used footpaths. It is not anticipated that the Winter Wonderland installation will impact the composition or structure of the woodland habitat.
- The installation is operated outwith the main red squirrel breeding season (February to September). As long as the temporary illuminations are dismantled before the end of January, impact on breeding squirrels would be negligible.
- Bats typically hibernate during December and January. As no potential hibernacula were recorded, there would be no significant potential impact on these species.
- The illuminations are timed outside the bird nesting season, so no significant impact on this sensitive time period for birds is anticipated. The area will be used for foraging, including potentially by owl, however the relatively small area of habitat affected is unlikely to compromise overall feeding opportunities significantly.