

Spring Surveys Factsheet

Spring marks the start of the main survey season for ecology, and is the key period for great crested newt, reptile, breeding bird and daytime bat scoping surveys

[Natural England Standing Advice for those who need to assess planning applications that affect protected species](#)

“Survey reports and mitigation plans are required for development projects that could affect protected species, as part of getting planning permission or a mitigation licence. Surveys need to show whether protected species are present in the area or nearby, and how they use the site. Mitigation plans show how you’ll avoid, reduce or manage any negative effects to protected species”.

Great Crested Newt (GCN) Surveys: March – June | Peak period: mid- April until mid-May



If you have ponds on your site, you will most likely need to undertake a great crested newt survey.

Contrary to popular belief, newts spend the majority of their life on land, overwintering under stones, in log piles and within rough grass. Great Crested Newts then become active again when the weather starts to warm, beginning to return to the ponds to breed in March. The males return first, with the females following - both remaining in the ponds until around June.

This active breeding period is why GCN surveys can only be undertaken between March and June, with the peak period being mid-April to mid-May.

There are two types of great crested newt survey that REC Ltd can carry out:

- ▶ **Presence/ absence surveys** - require 4 survey visits to determine if the species are present or not
- ▶ **Population size assessments** - require 6 surveys to determine the population size.

For most sites, we undertake 4 surveys as standard, and extend to 6 if great crested newts are found within the pond.

Missing the survey window could result in planning being delayed by a full year, as councils will only grant planning permission once all protected species surveys have been undertaken.

Survey Techniques

Bottle Traps: Great crested newt surveys involve a variety of techniques, most commonly setting bottle traps in ponds overnight. The bottle traps work like lobster traps, meaning that GCN newts (and other amphibians) are able to swim into the traps but not back out until they’re released. Often, surveyors will return to the site after dark to use high powered torches to search for newts, as this is when they are most active.

eDNA: In some cases, eDNA as a surveying technique can be used, whereby DNA from the environment in which an organism lives is taken, rather than directly from the organisms themselves. Natural England accepts this method of testing for GCN presence, but only if surveys are carried out between **April 15th and June 30th**. Natural England requires a population size class to be established when there is presence of great crested newts, in order to show the level of mitigation required for a European Protected Species Development Licence. Therefore, **six surveys are needed between March and June**, with at least three of these surveys carried out between mid-April and mid-May.

As eDNA sampling cannot be reliably undertaken until mid-April, if Great Crested Newts are confirmed present, there may not be enough time to fulfil Natural England’s guidelines for establishing a population size class. If great crested newts are found to be present within the site, a Natural England Mitigation License may be needed before development can proceed. NE licenses typically take 30 working days to be processed, though in some cases this can take much longer. NE licenses can only





be applied for once planning permission has been granted, and so it is important to factor in these timescales for the start date of development. If newt translocation is also required, this can add further delays.

The sooner you get the great crested newt surveys completed, the sooner you will be able to assess the likely timescales and impacts on your scheme.

Reptile Surveys: March - October



Some species of reptile, such as slow worms (pictured) are surprisingly common throughout the UK, and are present in a range of urban and rural environments. Other species, such as common lizard and grass snake, have more particular habitat requirements.

Generally, the species like unmanaged mosaic habitats which include long and short vegetation, and plenty of opportunities for shelter from avian predators. Most species of reptile bask on objects such as stone or metal, and often utilise manmade debris for this purpose.

Reptile surveys can be undertaken between **March and October**, when reptiles are at their most active, but the optimal times are from **April until June and in September**.

Survey Technique:

The surveys involve setting out a series of reptile mats (which are often roofing felt or corrugated metal) and then visiting the site for 7 consecutive visits to check the mats for the presence of the species.

If reptiles are found to be present, mitigation will be required. Sometimes this involves relocating the species to a retained area of the site, or in rare cases moving them off site. No NE license is required for this for common reptiles, though this does have to be agreed in writing with the local council. Reptile translocation can only be undertaken between March and October when reptiles are active.

Breeding Bird Surveys: March - September

If you need to undertake any vegetation or structure clearance between March and September, the area should first be checked by a suitably qualified ecologist for the presence of any nests or nests in construction. If a nest is located, a stand off from the area will need to be maintained until the young have fledged. This process can take several weeks.

On larger schemes, assessments for the presence of notable breeding birds may be required to inform ecological impact assessments. Breeding Bird Surveys include monthly transects during the breeding season to assess bird species present, status of breeding and the importance of the breeding assemblage on site. **Bird transects should cover the key months of March to July.**



Bat Surveys: May – October | Daytime Scoping Surveys: January - December



Bat survey season will start in May and continue until October. Prior to nocturnal surveys, we recommend having a Daytime Bat Scoping Survey of the trees or buildings on your site to assess their potential to support roosting bats. The results of these surveys will inform the level of nocturnal surveys required later in the season. **Daytime Scoping Surveys can be undertaken at any time of the year.**

Dormouse Surveys: April onwards

Dormice have a geographic range restricted to southern England and Wales, except for small populations in Cumbria and Northumberland. They rely on hedgerows and woodlands for their habitat, with their hibernation period extending from November until April.

Survey season for Dormice begins once hibernation has ended, which is in **April**, although monthly visits need to be planned early to ensure dormouse tubes can be installed in suitable areas.

Survey Techniques:

For **smaller sites** where only small parts of habitats might be lost, (for example, gaps in hedgerows, or removal of small amounts of bramble), visual searches can be done.

For **larger projects** where habitats may be damaged, dormice surveying is done with nest tubes and next boxes.



For more information on any of the above, or to book in your protected species surveys, contact our national REC Ecology team on 0845 676 9303 or email ecology@recltd.co.uk

