SPRING

Improved hedgerows create an important habitat for Dormice (left), we will also encourage Barn Owls to nest as part of our ecology masterplan.

The site is designed so sheep can graze. Findings show solar farms are providing habitat for Yellowhammers (right).

NATURE AND WILDLIFE

Today the land at Foxwalks Farm contains a mixture of sheep-grazed improved grassland and arable fields with species-poor hedgerows, some with mature trees, providing internal and external boundaries which will all be retained if the solar farm proposal is approved.

It is a rural area with agricultural land and areas of woodland extending beyond the site boundaries and our ambition is to significantly enhance the ecology alongside the generation of clean electricity.

PROTECTING AND ENHANCING ECOLOGY

Our ecologists have surveyed the site extensively throughout 2022 and into 2023 to understand the site and identify opportunities to enhance the ecology and biodiversity. If our proposal is approved, we will make sensitive changes to evolve the existing habitats within and around the site to offer a wider spectrum of habitat including species rich grassland, new hedgerows and a small orchard, significantly increasing the potential for:

- A broad range of invertebrates typically associated with the field boundary habitats and also within the fields when in flower or being grazed.
- Common reptiles such as slow worm and grass snake.
- Amphibians such as palmate newt, smooth newt, common frog and common toad.

- Farmland birds, in particular skylark that will benefit from 9 acres of grassland which will be managed specifically to attract this species.
- A range of bat species foraging over the land and using potential roost features likely to be associated to mature boundary trees and offsite woodland and farm buildings.
- Mammals including otters, water vole, badger, fox, deer, hare, hedgehog and smaller rodents. Dormouse could utilise the boundary hedgerows and offsite woodland and other arboreal habitats.

If our proposal is successful it will be important to ensure that the construction of the solar farm is planned and delivered in a way that minimises risks to local wildlife and through the planning application process we expect to work with the local authority to agree the best methods for achieving this.

During its operational life, a well-designed and well managed solar farm can significantly improve the opportunity for wildlife - including protected species, when compared to conventional farm management. The ecological enhancements and re-wilding that are proposed can benefit the wildlife within the site and can create positive effects beyond, such as the neighbouring Cobbler's Coppice woodland, by providing additional forage plants and better connectivity through the new grassland, hedgerows and trees proposed as part of the solar farm development.

AGRICULTURE CONTINUES

The solar park can continue to be used for food production for the lifetime of the solar park. Sheep can graze the wide spaces between and underneath the panels in Autumn and Winter and the land rested in Spring and Summer (conservation grazing) so the wild flower meadow can bloom. The planning permission and the agreement made with the landowners both require the land to be returned to agricultural use at the end of the 40-year life of the park.

Grassland will be managed to attract Skylarks.

PROVEN TO SUPPORT WILDLIFE

A 2019 report* proves that well-designed and well-managed solar farms deliver broad benefits for British biodiversity and sustainable agriculture. Solar farms are providing a haven for rare species including moths, foraging bats, yellowhammers and grey-legged partridges when developers cultivate tree-rich hedgerows and some sites are recorded as hosting six times more pollinators than control sites. Other benefits include:

- Increased fruit crop pollination for orchards close to wildflower meadows.
- Significantly higher plant and invertebrate diversity on sites with open drainage.
- Positive impacts on wetland bird breeding when artificial wetland features are introduced.

There is wide acceptance that if we continue current farming practice we are in danger of totally eradicating the fertility of our soils – if we exhaust our soil we can't grow crops.

And our project is fully reversible: after its operational life (40 years) all of the solar farm equipment is easily removed and the rested land will be revitalised, ready for harvest and benefit from an improved ecosystem.

* 'The Natural Capital Value of Solar' by the Solar Trade Association endorsed by the Natural Capital Coalition, the Centre for Alternative Technology and Ashden.

Click here to tell us your views