

Proposal for a Regional Nature Park for Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire



Report by

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This is a revised proposal for an enlarged Regional Nature Park in the Bernwood Otmoor and Ray areas of Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire. This proposal is written by REBORN – Returning Bernwood Otmoor Ray to Nature – a community action group.

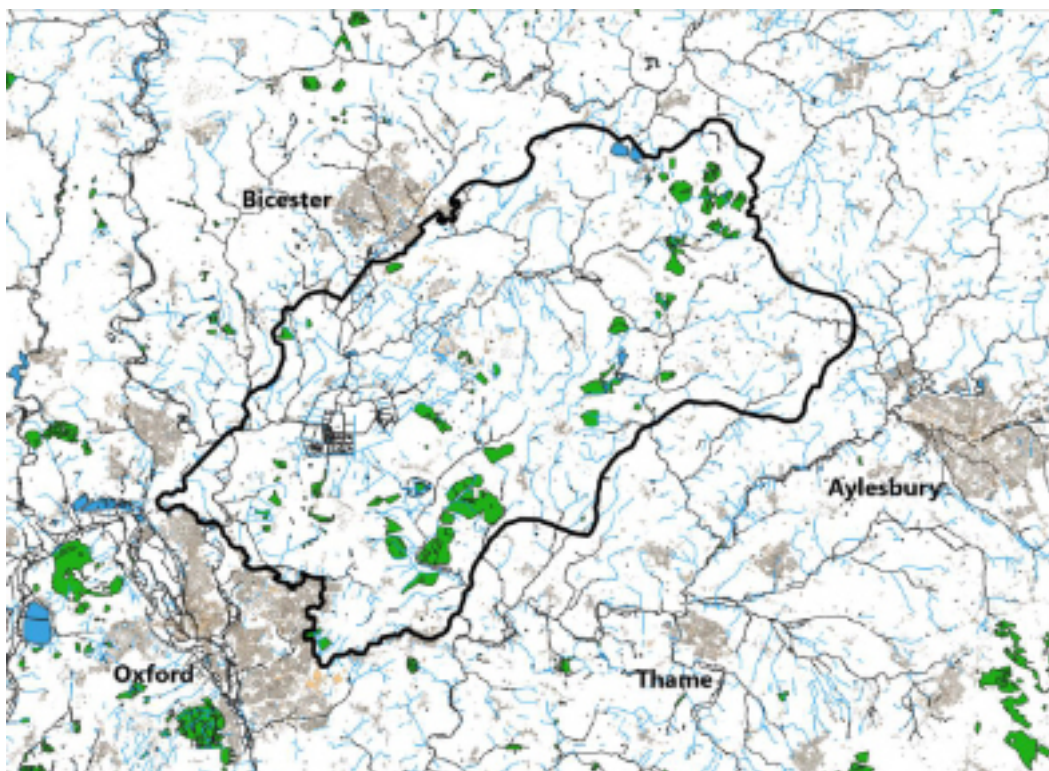
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1. The Proposal

We are proposing the designation of a strategic Green Infrastructure (GI) area covering 270 km² of Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire stretching from the Northern Bypass at Oxford including Shotover and Otmoor to the western edge of Bicester, extending into Buckinghamshire to cover all of the ancient forest areas of Bernwood and the Upper Ray meadows.

This is synonymous with the area covered in BBOWT's recent report 'Reconnecting Bernwood, Otmoor and the Ray - A call to action' and is also known as the BOR landscape (Bernwood, Otmoor and Ray).



Outline of the proposed park area

The strategic Green Infrastructure would be implemented through a land use Plan, transport plan, a stakeholder partnership and provision for a Ranger Service to deal with visitor/urban fringe issues. To give the strategic Green Infrastructure a clear identity we are calling it a Regional Nature Park (RNP). Our proposal for the designation and provisions of the RNP are innovative and tailored to the challenges of protecting, enhancing and developing strategic Green Infrastructure at this exceptional scale. The boundary shown is based on capturing maximum high Natural Capital¹ and room for new large natural areas.

¹ Natural Capital is defined as the natural resources and environmental features in a given area, regarded as having economic value or providing a service to humankind.

2. Benefits

Unique opportunity to deliver significant social, environmental and economic benefits to Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire:

Social benefits

- Better mental health through improved access to tranquil countryside, fulfil 'activity' Doctors' prescriptions
- More equitable access to landscape and countryside since the RNP is close to population centres, and with improved sustainable transport.
- Increased percentage of population benefiting from countryside recreation
- Benefits of Countryside Leisure available to people in some of Oxford's most deprived wards as well as easy access from Bicester, Aylesbury, Thame and the surrounding areas.

Environmental benefits

- Significant contribution to CO2 Climate Change target
 - Impact on reducing transport derived carbon dioxide by providing countryside recreation closer to population centres; and reducing NOx²
 - Opportunities for carbon capture through woodland and wetland and permanent meadow creation
- Significantly better delivery of biodiversity protection and increase through
 - minimizing development impact
 - managing public access to sensitive habitats
 - more effective habitat restoration and creation in ideal conditions with easy invertebrate colonisation through location by existing habitats
 - linking existing habitats to create larger species populations more resilient to climate change.
 - controlling light pollution and therefore protecting large bat population
- Conserved and improved landscape and views

Economic benefits

- Attracting businesses and skilled workers because it is a more desirable place to live because of easy access to high quality countryside
- More holiday and travel expenditure by residents staying in Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire through providing nearby Countryside accessible by sustainable transport
- New jobs and investment in tourism businesses as Countryside recreation increases
- New employment away from city / town centres
- More viable rural businesses including farms through diversifying and increasing turnover

Challenges

- Changing transport infrastructure
 - making roads more cycle and pedestrian friendly, cycle friendly traffic calming, safer junctions for cycles, implementing 'Quiet' Lanes
 - securing bridleway extensions to improve access to the Leisure and Wildlife Area and linking to Oxford Parkway rail station
 - provision of new bus services and links with rail and bus hubs
 - limiting peak-timerat-run through the Countryside Leisure and Wildlife Area
- Securing buy-in by landowners for Water Park and habitat creation and restoration

² NOx is shorthand for nitric oxide (NO) and nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), the nitrogen oxides that are most relevant for air pollution

3. Action Plan for delivering the RNP

A statutory planning document (similar to an Area Action Plan) will enact protective policies against major development and also incremental infill development. The aim is to preserve the character of the area, secure links between environmental assets, and avoid damaging localised visitor pressure (including dog fouling) on sensitive habitats. There would also be policies supportive of sustainable land management and visitor-focused businesses and new visitor-focused large natural areas on the edge of towns.

A sustainable and active travel plan covering the RNP will take advantage of the nearness to major settlements to deliver a mode change away from cars for leisure trips and commuting.

A visitor management strategy alongside the transport plan will be designed to deflect visitors from the more sensitive natural habitats (such as RSPB Otmoor with ground breeding and over wintering ground feeding birds). It would tackle the urban fringe issues (of unregulated access and illegal activities) which are already facing many farmers and landowners, and include provision of the new visitor friendly large natural area.

A non-statutory informal Partnership will need to be set up to co-ordinate action on the ground. We envisage that the environmental supportive and protecting land-use policies will encourage landowners, government agencies, charitable funds and the non-statutory sector to have confidence in green investing in the RNP. The partnership will ensure achievement of synergies (sharing essential project costs such as equipment hire, or modifying a project to meet wider environmental gains) and resolution of conflicts (such as connecting up ancient woodland blocks impacting historic landscapes) likely with such a multi-objective project.

Funding will come through Biodiversity Gain³ and mitigations linked to development, 'Green Business' opportunities and sustainable transport budgets, but also from taking advantage of the size and ambition of the RNP to tap into regional and national funding –including securing uplift for farmers and landowner payments recently given to AONBs.

³ See paper from Natural England on Biodiversity Gain –https://naturalengland.blog.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/183/2022/04/BNG-Brochure_Final_Compressed-002.pdf

4. Why we need the RNP here and what it will deliver

4.1 Summary of reasons for RNP

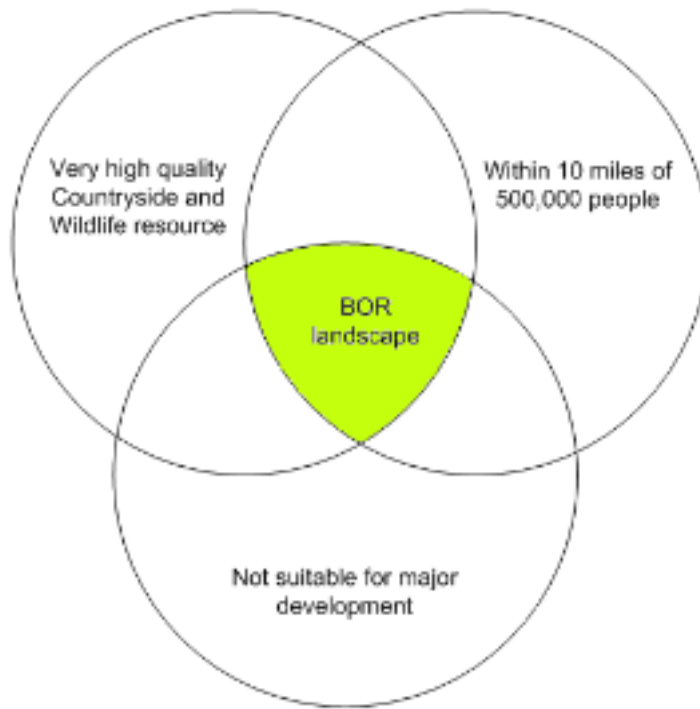
The many reasons for locating a strategic Green Infrastructure here are accumulative –there is no other area of Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire that combines both the threats and opportunities found in the RNP area. The RNP can therefore deliver the requirements for designation as strategic Green Infrastructure.

The accumulative reasons that together uniquely apply to the location and size of the RNP are:

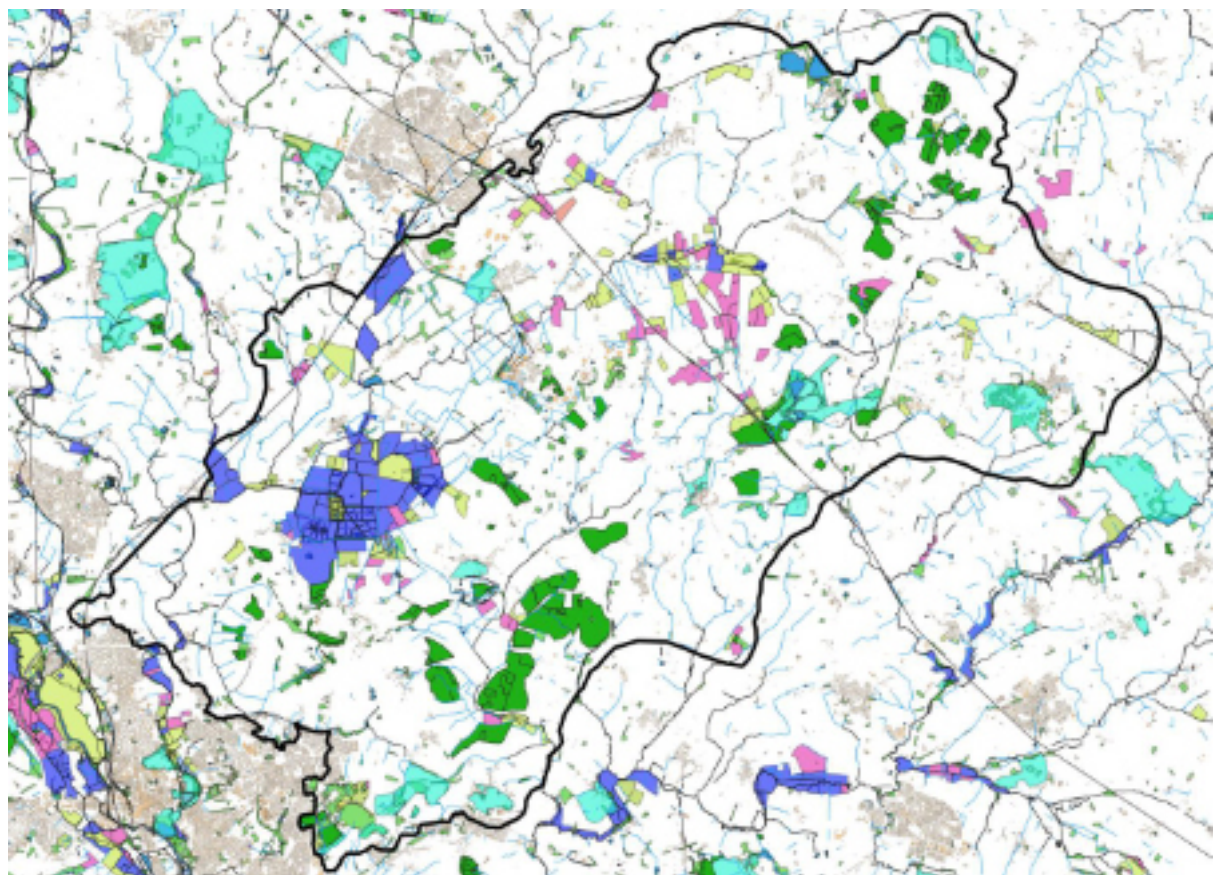
- Protecting priority habitats and an unusually high concentration of wildlife
- Major threats to nature and Natural Capital in this location next to major population centres.
- Opportunities derived from the nearness to major towns to provide wellbeing and health benefits where the need is –the RNP can deliver a deep countryside experience close to Oxford, Bicester and Aylesbury due to the much lower population density than other areas adjacent to these population centres, and contribute to cutting the cost of mental ill health and inactive lifestyles.
- The low population density along with low road infrastructure density which allows for the expansion of natural areas thereby tackling habitat fragmentation, and the restoration of landscapes without modern settlements and roads breaking them up.
- The large size of the RNP. This is of major benefit to nature⁴ and Natural Capital enhancement, landscape character and historic landscape restoration at a landscape –scale.
- The quality and importance of the nature resource including non–designated sites requiring extra protection.
- The track record of nature enhancement in the RNP area. An example is the BBOWT Living Landscape projects and the creation and expansion of RSPB Otmoor.
- RNP covers Natural Capital, nature resource and landscapes that cross County and District Council boundaries, and therefore needs to be designated at a regional level.
- Able to contribute to climate change CO₂ targets because the Area is
 - well located to provide sustainable transport access to high–quality Countryside Leisure–the best placed in the County.
 - able to deliver land management changes that increase carbon capture of the soil













⁴ Based on Island biographical effects, extended scope for connections between habitat sites and increase diversity of habitats supporting rarer species needing more than one habitat in their life cycle

- Unsuitable for other strategic land uses, i.e. major housing, transport or employment. Developing it for Countryside Leisure and Wildlife uses an otherwise under-used resource

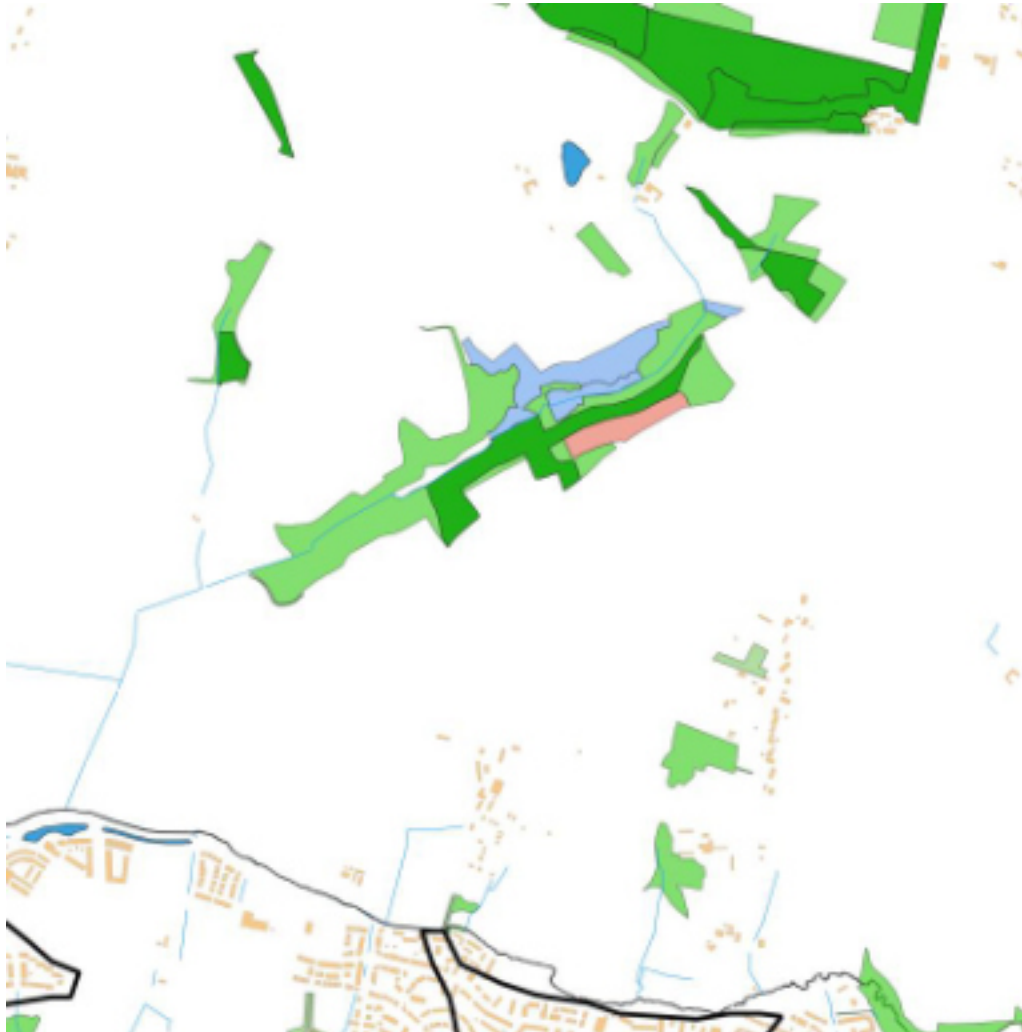


4.2 Protecting priority habitats



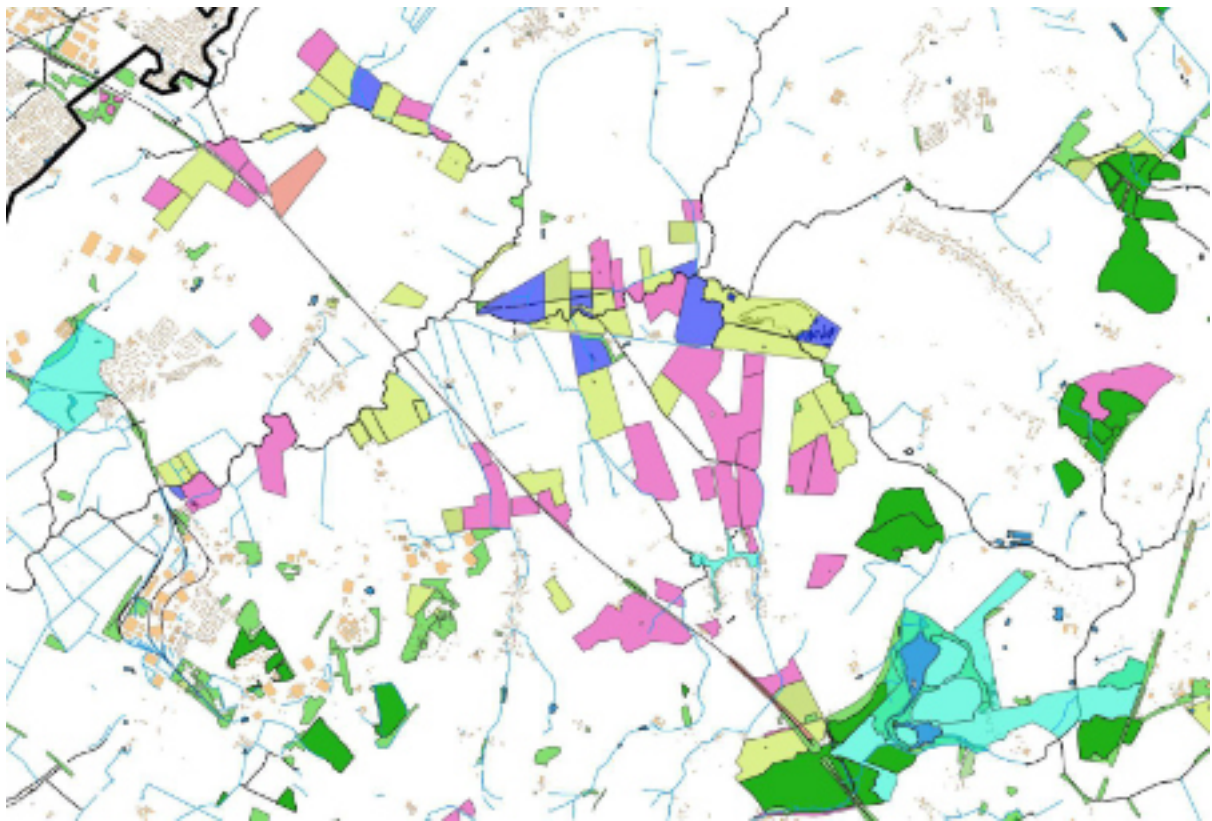
-  Ancient Woodland
-  Coastal and floodplain grazing marsh
-  Deciduous woodland
-  Good quality semi improved grassland
-  Lowland calcareous grassland
-  Lowland dry acid grassland
-  Lowland fens
-  Lowland heathland
-  Lowland meadows
-  Purple moor grass and rush pastures
-  Traditional orchard
-  Wood Pasture and Parkland







Detailed map of Sydlings Copse– close to the edge of Oxford and showing rare habitats in a small area



- Ancient Woodland
- Lowland fens
- Lowland calcareous grassland
- Deciduous woodland

Detailed map of Upper Ray habitats



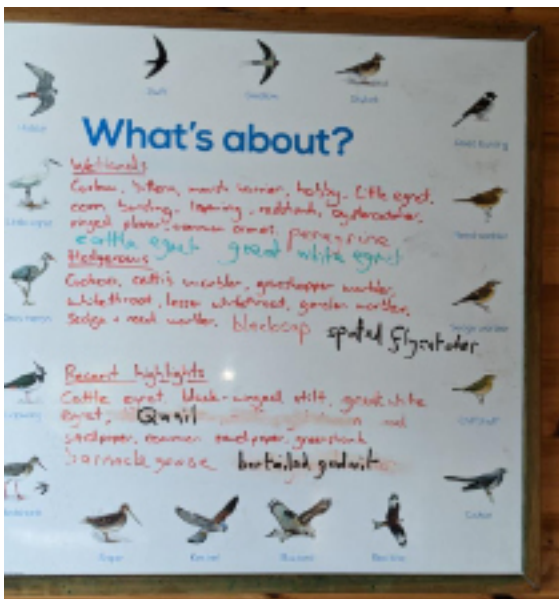
-  Ancient Woodland
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4.3 Unusually high concentration of wildlife

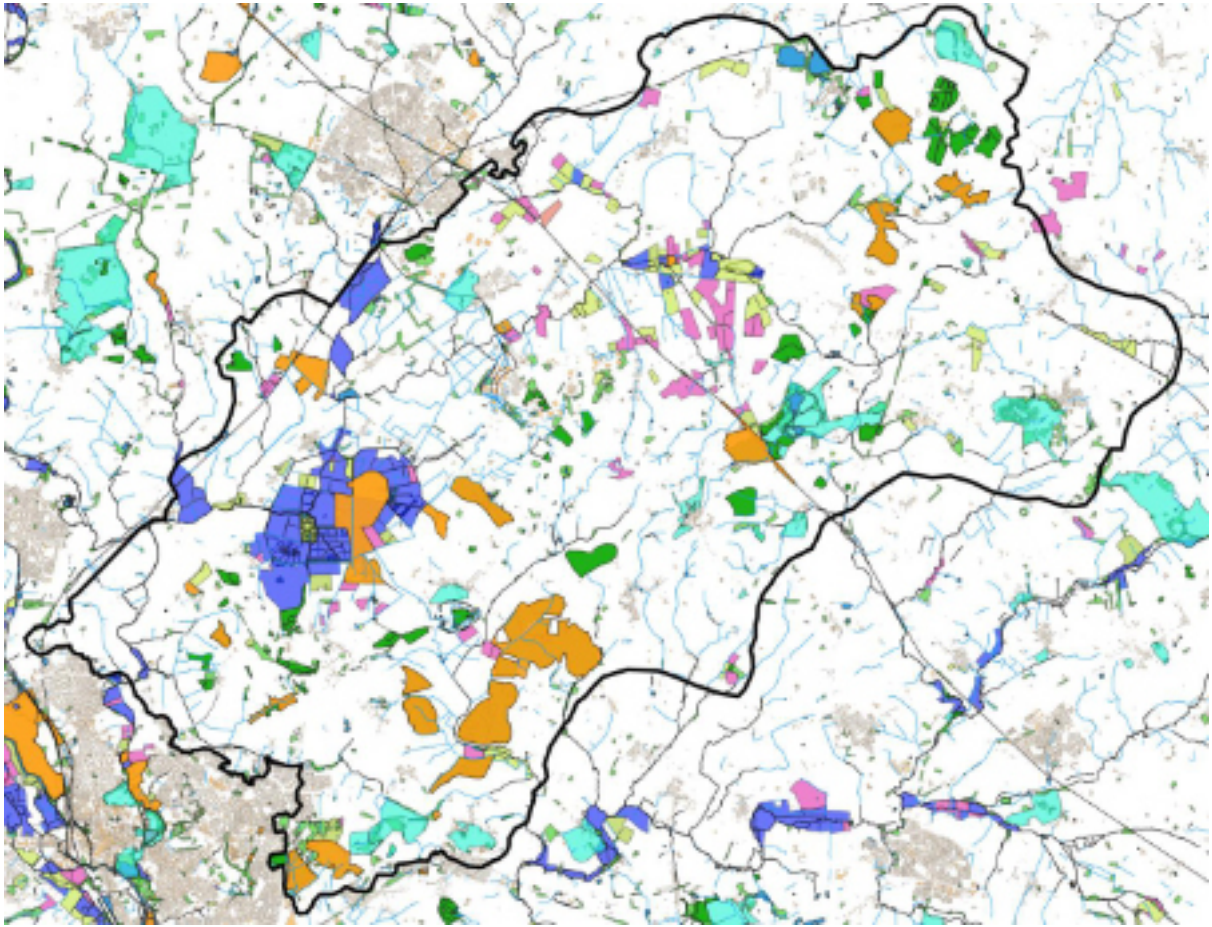


Cranes at the RSPB Otmoor reserve

The wildlife value of the proposed RNP is very high, and no other part of Oxfordshire has such a high hectareage of designated sites (SSSIs and Local wildlife sites), irreplaceable habitats (ancient woodlands and plantations on former ancient woodland), priority habitats (oak woodland, wetland, acid grassland, calcareous grassland, and lowland meadows) and priority species (including rare butterflies and bats) and nature reserves. English Nature, in the 1990s, declared the area a regional biodiversity hotspot.



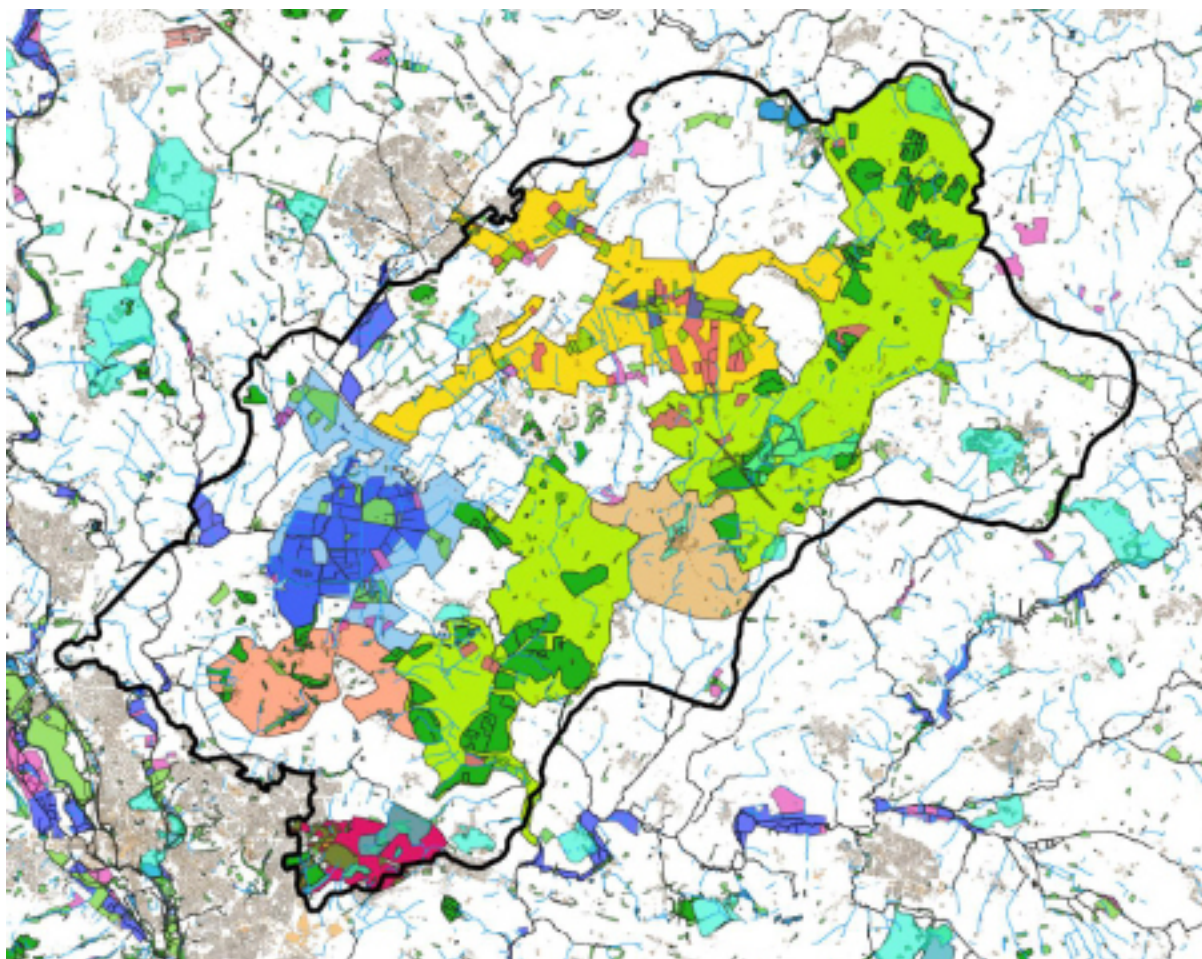
Sightings board from RSPB Otmoor



Sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs) shown in Orange

4.4 Target Conservation Areas / Biodiversity Opportunity Areas

Much of the area has been identified as areas needing conservation or highly suited to nature recovery. These are described in the Target Conservation Areas (in Oxfordshire) and Biodiversity Opportunity Areas (in Buckinghamshire) protecting priority habitats.



Target Conservation Areas / Biodiversity Opportunity Areas within the proposed park area⁵

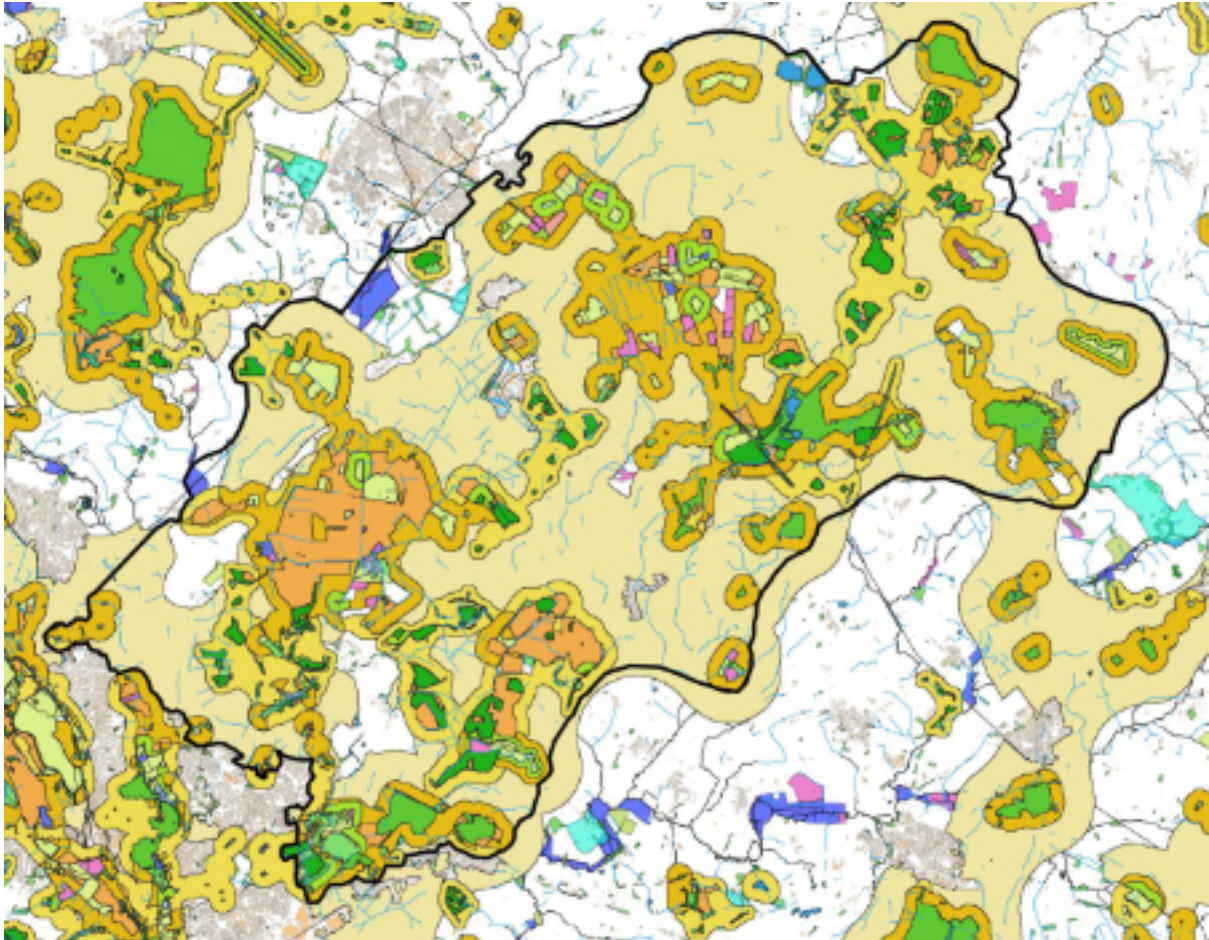
The 6 BOAs / TCAs in the park area are:

-  Brill and Muswell Hill
-  Shotover
-  Ray
-  Oxford Heights East
-  Otmoor
-  Bernwood






⁵ Map of Target Conservation Areas / Biodiversity Opportunity Areas courtesy of Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC) and Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Environmental Records Centre (BMERC)

4.5 National Habitat Network

This is data created by Natural England to describe 18 priority habitats based on the priority habitat inventory with additional data added in relation to habitat restoration–creation, restorable habitat, plus fragmentation action, and network enhancement and expansion zones.



Map of the National Habitat Network and the RNP; shows the square shape and large size of the RNP, the density (and variety) of natural habitats, restoration and creation areas and scope for enhancement and expansion.

-  Restorable Habitat
-  Network Enhancement Zone 1
-  Network Enhancement Zone 2
-  Network Expansion Zone
-  Fragmentation Action Zone

For further information on these zones see Appendix 1