

**Summary of Proof of Evidence
of Frederick Robert Gomes
for the
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds**

22nd December 2010

Town & Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended)

In the matter of:

**Planning Applications for Construction of a runway extension and erection of a
terminal building at London Ashford Airport, Lydd, Kent**

**Planning Inspectorate Refs: APP/L2250/V/10/2131934
 APP/L2250/V/10/2131936**



1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. I am Frederick Robert Gomes and I am employed as an area manager by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (the **RSPB**). I have extensive experience as a field ornithologist and in the conservation of wetland habitats. I have worked on RSPB nature reserves for 37 years and at the RSPB Dungeness Nature Reserve (the **Reserve**) for eight years. My experiences are set out in Section 1 of my proof. I manage a team of six permanent staff and have overall responsibility for the management of the Reserve.

2. THE RSPB

2.1. The RSPB is Europe's largest wildlife conservation charity with over one million members. Its principal objective is the conservation of wild birds and their habitats.

3. SCOPE OF EVIDENCE

3.1. In my evidence I will describe:

3.1.1. the history and status of the Reserve;

3.1.2. the nature conservation importance of the Reserve;

3.1.3. the RSPB's objectives for and management of the Reserve;

3.1.4. the visitor experience, education and community use at the Reserve; and

3.1.5. my concerns about the potential impacts on the amenity and educational value of the Reserve were the applications to expand Lydd airport be allowed.

3.2. I do have serious concerns that the significant expansion proposed at Lydd airport could adversely impact rare habitats and species that occur on the Dungeness foreland¹ and the Reserve, and many of which are features of the designated sites (the Special Protection Area (**SPA**) and the proposed extension to the SPA (**pSPA**), the proposed Ramsar site (**pRamsar**), Special Area of Conservation (**SAC**) and Site of Special Scientific Interest (**SSSI**)). However, as others are presenting evidence on these issues at the inquiry, I do not intend to cover these in my evidence.

¹ Foreland is a headland of land.

4. HISTORY AND STATUS OF THE RESERVE

- 4.1. The Dungeness foreland is famous for its rich and diverse wildlife, much of which can be seen by the many people and schools visiting the Reserve. Throughout the year, visitors can gain exceptional views of resident birds (such as breeding marsh harriers), and during the winter months the spectacle of large flocks of waterfowl², ducks, geese and swans. The Reserve is also home to a unique variety of aquatic and terrestrial invertebrates and rare plant species.
- 4.2. The RSPB has had a long involvement with the Dungeness foreland, which is the largest shingle structure in the UK and has the most diverse and extensive examples of stable vegetated shingle in Europe. It first employed local Dungeness residents as “watchers” in 1905 to protect seabirds and scarce birds.
- 4.3. The RSPB first acquired land on the Dungeness foreland in 1931. The RSPB's acquisition and management has played a major role in maintaining this special shingle habitat and the associated diverse terrestrial and aquatic flora and fauna. The Reserve now occupies nearly a thousand hectares, much of which is designated as an SPA, pSPA, SAC, SSSI and pRamsar site (see maps in Appendix I).

5. NATURE CONSERVATION IMPORTANCE OF THE RESERVE

- 5.1. In my main proof, I detail the nature conservation importance of the Reserve (see section 5 and the data in Appendix II). In summary, a large variety of rare birds (including Annex I³ and UK Biodiversity Action Plan (**BAP**) species⁴) occur at the Reserve throughout the year, including:
 - 5.1.1. Breeding birds, such as marsh harrier, bittern, purple heron, avocet, common tern and Dartford warbler; and
 - 5.1.2. Overwintering birds, such as Bewick's swan, bittern, marsh harrier and golden plover (all occurring in nationally significant numbers), whilst 1% of the national winter population of shoveler occurs on the Reserve in some years.

² In the text where the word 'waterfowl' is used, this includes swans, geese, ducks, waders, cormorants, coot and moorhen, 'Wetland birds' includes all the above together with water rail, herons and egrets, gulls and terns. 'Waders' includes wading birds such as curlew, godwits, lapwing, plovers, sanderling and dunlin.

³ Annex I species are species cited in the European Council Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds 2009/147/EC (CD5.3) and receive special conservation measures.

⁴ Please see Dr. Day's proof, paragraphs 5.2-5.6.

- 5.2. Dungeness is also a major migration point for birds arriving and departing the UK.
- 5.3. The Reserve contains some of the best examples of undamaged shingle ridge formations on the foreland. This supports a range of vegetation communities, ranging from coastal pioneer communities to inland terrestrial acid heathland, as well as bare shingle and disturbed areas. These and the other principal habitats on the Reserve support some rare and protected non-avian species, many of which are UK BAP, Schedule 5⁵ and/or Red Data Book species⁶.

6. THE RSPB'S MANAGEMENT AT THE RESERVE

- 6.1. In the eighty years since the RSPB's first land acquisition, the RSPB has undertaken a huge amount of management to both preserve and improve the Reserve's rare and often unique features.
- 6.2. Much of our management on the Reserve, often part funded by public monies, has been targeted at wetland creation and enhancement to improve the habitats for breeding waterfowl, other wetland birds and seabirds. Examples include creating and restoring islands for seabirds in the Reserve's gravel pits and creating new wetland reedbed on Dengemarsh for bittern and marsh harrier.
- 6.3. As well as managing habitats for birds, our management in recent years has also been directed at non-avian species for which the Reserve is of international significance, including for example its unique assemblage of invertebrates.

The RSPB's aims for the Reserve

- 6.4. In order to maintain and enhance the Reserve's habitats, our future plans include the creation of additional pools, reedbeds and islands in the gravel pits for seabirds and other nesting birds. In summary, our management aims for the SSSI, SPA, pSPA and SAC (and also the pRamsar) designations on the Reserve are to:

⁵ Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) (CD5.12) lists animals (other than birds) that qualify for protection under the Act.

⁶ RDB species are species (other than birds) whose continued existence is threatened. RDB species are classified into different categories of perceived risk. The Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) is responsible for some of the RDB publications reflecting the status of some plant species types in Britain and Ireland. See <http://www.jncc.gov.uk/page-2133>.

- 6.4.1. maintain the important shingle ridges.
- 6.4.2. maintain 140 ha of artificial wetland habitat (used by, for example, great crested newt, Bewick's swan and shoveler).
- 6.4.3. manage 60 ha of neutral lowland grassland to provide suitable conditions for breeding lapwing and redshank, a suite of key grassland birds and for BAP bumblebees.
- 6.4.4. manage 1 ha of artificial damps sand habitats for their populations of invertebrates and plants.
- 6.4.5. manage the important series of natural wetlands (the Oppen pits).

7. THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

- 7.1. The wide variety of birds and other wildlife that can be seen in all seasons, combined with the foreland's generally tranquil environment, makes the Reserve a special place for both keen birdwatchers and the general public.
- 7.2. Despite human intrusions, such as the nuclear power station, the airport and MOD activity, a visitor can still experience something very special, including the sense of remoteness, wildness and tranquillity that one might normally associate with other wild areas away from any nearby development.
- 7.3. The feedback from our many visitors confirms that the currently tranquil and unique character of the Dungeness foreland is an integral part of any visit to the Reserve and adds considerably to the enjoyment of the place and its wildlife. For example, in a sample questionnaire, 40% of visitors replied that the landscape influenced their decision to visit the area and 45% replied that peace and tranquillity influenced their decision to visit the area.
- 7.4. The RSPB, often assisted by external public funders, has invested over £1 million pounds in developing the visitor infrastructure and interpretation at the Reserve.

8. EDUCATION

- 8.1. As well as receiving over 29,000 visitors per year, the Reserve is one of the RSPB's network of environmental education centres and has a flourishing education programme.
- 8.2. The Reserve's qualified education staff, based in a purpose built classroom funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and others, provide curriculum-linked activities for schools, encouraging young people to explore their natural environment.
- 8.3. As well as a team of volunteers who assist us with our work on the Reserve, the classroom and Reserve are used by local community groups, including scouts and brownies, artists and photographers and professional organisations.

9. POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON THE RESERVE OF EXPANSION AT LYDD AIRPORT

- 9.1. Whilst other witnesses detail the nature conservation impacts of the proposals, there is one matter regarding the maintenance of the interest of the Reserve and the RSPB's obligations as a landowner on which I wish to comment.
- 9.2. There is a legal obligation to maintain the designated sites that cover the Reserve, and the RSPB often receives public money to do so. If the airport expansion is granted, the RSPB's future plans and, in some case, the legal obligations to maintain the designated sites and associated wildlife could, I believe, be compromised. I am concerned that the airport expansion could frustrate the nature conservation and management work we have done on the Reserve to date, due to the possible visual and noise effects from larger jets on populations of SPA species for example. I also fear that the close association between the Dengemarsh reedbed and neighbouring fields directly under the flight path, where SPA species feed, could be threatened by airport bird control.
- 9.3. In my proof, I set out the importance of the Reserve for visitors and education and highlight the use of and wider benefits to the community. I consider an essential part of the visitor experience at the Reserve is being able to enjoy the sense of being in a wild place and a

sense of tranquillity. I am therefore very concerned that this generally tranquil environment will change with the introduction of larger aircraft. I fear that the balance will be tipped by the impact of the increased frequency, noise and visual presence of the additional large air traffic, exacerbated by the fact that the noise and sight of large aircraft will draw attention to themselves as they move across both the land and the sky in this wide, open landscape.

- 9.4. The noise from the engines from large planes (that do not currently use the airport) will, I fear, be aimed directly towards the Reserve on some occasions (e.g. as large aircraft bank right on a southerly take off). I believe this could result in visitors experiencing significantly higher noise levels than under the present situation and impact on their quiet enjoyment of the Reserve.
- 9.5. These changes, I fear, may result in a reduction in the number of people who wish to visit the Reserve, since the special landscape and elements that make up the Dungeness area would, I believe, be significantly altered and undermined if the applications are permitted.
- 9.6. I consider that increased disturbance from the airport could also detract from the educational experience of the Reserve, potentially reducing the educational benefits and thus the number of overall visits. I consider it very important that those who come to learn specifically about wildlife at a nature reserve do so in a way that provides a formative and lasting experience. In my view, the value of this is likely to be greater in a more tranquil environment that helps to enhance the wildness and remoteness of the Reserve and supports the quiet enjoyment of its special wildlife. I am concerned that this experience will be threatened by the increased disturbance I describe above.

10. CONCLUSION

- 10.1. The Reserve's shingle and wetland habitats, and the species they support, are of outstanding importance to wildlife, recognised at national, European and international levels. These unique and rare habitats and species, combined with the general environment and the current sense of wilderness on the foreland and Reserve, are integral to the visitor and education experience on the Reserve.

- 10.2. In conclusion, it is my belief that a commercial scale airport at Lydd could:
- 10.2.1. negatively impact on the Reserve's visitor and educational amenity through peak noise events and visual intrusion and changing the area's unique landscape;
 - 10.2.2. undermine much of the RSPB's work already undertaken at the Reserve, some partly funded by public bodies; and
 - 10.2.3. constrain future nature conservation management, aimed at further improving rare and threatened habitats and species.