

PRESS RELEASE - MIDDLEWICK NIGHTINGALES 01/08/2024

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Nightingales Under Siege: Urgent Call to Halt Plans for 1000 Houses Threatening a Top Two UK Population

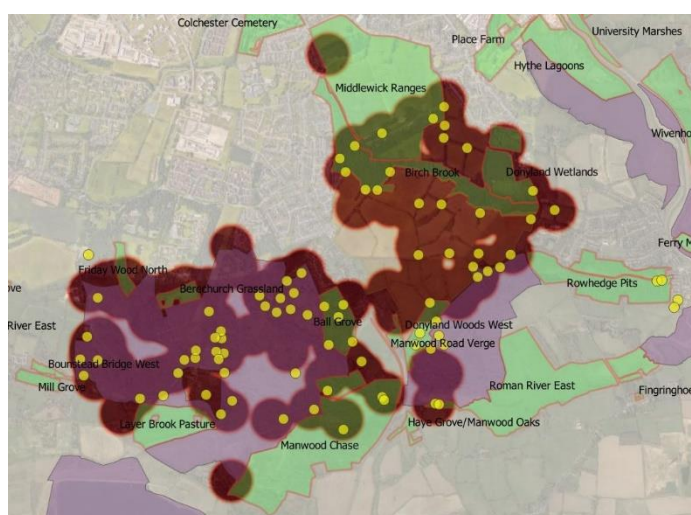
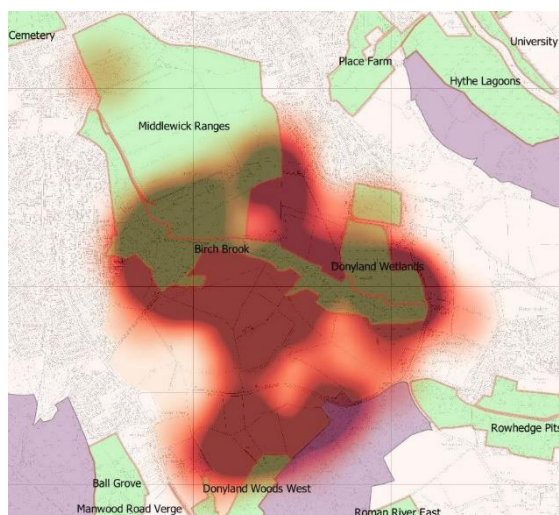
Colchester, Essex — Spring bird surveys have confirmed MOD land including Middlewick Ranges as **one of the top two most important Nightingale population in Britain**. However, they now face an **imminent threat** from the development of 1000 houses under the council's Local Plan. The Ministry of Defence has put the site up for sale.

Nightingales – and their mesmerising song – have captured imaginations for millennia. From Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" to Maschwitz and Sherwin's "A Nightingale Sang in Berkely Square", nightingales are an iconic species – often evoking love and loss. Now the local community faces the possible loss of their treasured songbird to highly controversial plans to develop the 'Green Lungs of Colchester' – which is also a 'bug haven' for 1,500 invertebrates including many threatened species and supports 1/10th of rare acid grassland in Essex.

Joseph Beale, RSPB Conservation Officer for Kent and Essex, said: **"Middlewick Ranges is one of the top sites for Nightingales in the UK. It's vital that these iconic, red-listed birds are properly and robustly protected. Through the local plan a better alternative site needs to be found where people and nature can coexist harmoniously and allow this precious Nightingale population to be safeguarded."**

Coordinated nighttime surveys for Nightingale have been carried out during April and May 2024 by seven experienced Essex 'birders'. They not only confirmed past surveys which put Colchester's Nightingales on the map – but also showed a significant increase in numbers, with a peak count of 59 singing males across the survey area potentially impacted by development - part of a larger population of a over 100 singing males, a huge total.

UK Nightingale populations have been hit hard for decades including from intensive farming, deer overgrazing and development, leading to a frightening 90% decline since 1950s and their Red Listed status.



Middlewick Nightingale Project 2024: Heat Maps, showing highest density areas of singing males recorded across the survey areas: i) Middlewick survey area and ii) Colchester Barracks wider survey area (yellow dots = 2012 BTO data for comparison)

Greg Conway, Senior Research Ecologist at British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), says: **"The 2012 national BTO nightingale survey showed Colchester Barracks (including Middlewick Ranges) to be the second most important population in the country, second only to Lodge Hill in Kent."** A ray of hope for conservationists and campaigners, the development plans at Lodge Hill were refused – specifically because of the impacts on nightingales, including disturbance from lighting, noise and traffic. And predation from cats!

Greg went on to say: **"Long term BTO monitoring surveys indicate that nightingale numbers have seen a welcome upturn nationally since 2017. This reflects the increase in numbers found at Middlewick in recent years indicating that the site is still of high importance in a national context."**

HISTORY OF MIDDLEWICK – AND LOOMING THREAT

Middlewick Ranges dates back to before the Boer war and has hosted generations of soldiers cutting their teeth. Both ex-service men and women and locals reminiscing their childhood playground remember their time on 'The Wick' fondly. With its outgrown 'classic MOD hedgerows', scrubby woodland margins and vibrant yellow gorse, the site supports phenomenal nightingale habitat. Ironically, the MOD land that once safeguarded Nightingales as a firing range now poses their greatest threat. In 2021, the guns fell silent with plans to sell the land for housing development. Now, this sanctuary is under a different line of fire from prospective developers.

MIDDLEWICK NIGHTINGALE PROJECT 2024

Martin Pugh, organiser of the survey and Senior Ecological Consultant, praised the efforts of the sleep deprived nightingale surveyors: **"There are not many other places you can hear five or six Nightingales singing simultaneously – a stone's throw from the centre of town!"** The surveys carried out by seven experienced ornithologists confirmed over 50 territories – forming part of a wider population of well over 100 singing males, almost exclusively on MOD land ('Colchester Barracks', including Friday Woods and Roman River SSSI). **This represents at least 2% of all Nightingales in Britain.** When including nearby Fingringhoe Wick and Abberton Reservoir SSSI populations (33 and 39 singing males respectively, pers comm 2024) then **this represents over 3% of the UK Nightingale population (based on the previous known national figure of around 5,500 Nightingale territories).**

Martin goes on to say: "Paving over Middlewick Ranges, a crucial biodiversity hotspot, would destroy some Nightingale territories outright and significantly impact others alongside a wealth of other wildlife including European protected Barbastelle bats which depend on this wild and green space. This would also permanently erase the largest expanse of rare acid grassland in Essex and vital carbon sink — unconscionable in a climate and biodiversity crisis."

NIGHTINGALE FACTS

Nightingales or literally 'night singers', have adapted to mainly nocturnal and crepuscular (dusk and dawn) song as their voice carries further in hours of darkness and there is less competition from other species. They have a staggering array of vocalisations with around 1000 distinct sounds arranged in infinite combinations. This bird, slightly larger than a Robin, is also ground nesting and so particularly vulnerable to predation from wild animals – as well as domesticated cats that come with new developments (1000 houses equals 3-400 additional cats).

CONTROVERSIAL AND CONTESTED PLANS

The proposals for Middlewick Ranges were highly controversial from day one in 2016 when the designated Local Wildlife Site was first proposed for housing under the Colchester City Council Local Plan. Local and national experts have strongly contested and denounced the proposals with devastating impacts on nightingales and many other protected and notable wildlife which also include barbastelle bat and vanishingly rare invertebrates.

"Clearly the whole area encompassing Middlewick is exceptionally important for not only the Essex but the national nightingale population" says Simon Wood, President Essex Birdwatching Society. He goes on to say **"Any development at Middlewick will result in a clear increase in disturbance through the construction process, habitat degradation through the proximity of the development itself caused by increased recreation (especially dog walking), noise, lighting, pets etc., all of which will adversely affect this significant population."**

Currently – if you listen carefully at twilight – you can hear Nightingale song wherever you are stood on Middlewick Ranges. In the midst of a Biodiversity Crisis, existential for humans as well of the living world, it would be a damning indictment of the local planning authority and the Ministry of Defence if this population fell silent on their watch.

Organisations supporting the campaign to save Middlewick Ranges include Buglife, Essex Wildlife Trust, RSPB, CPRE Essex, Community Planning Alliance, Essex Field Club and Colchester Natural History Society.

ADDITIONAL QUOTES

“With the Range no longer in use by the MOD, its inclusion in the Local Plan casts a looming shadow over the site. There is a real chance that the Ranges will be sold and 1,000 homes built – destroying and fragmenting this unique habitat. Local Wildlife Sites should be the building blocks for nature’s recovery, especially a site as important as Middlewick. If development was to go ahead, it would set a dangerous precedent of government departments facilitating the destruction of important nature sites and going against their own commitments to halting declines in biodiversity by 2030.” – Buglife

LINKS

[Middlewick Ranges - Buglife](#)

[Middlewick Ranges | Essex Wildlife Trust \(essexwt.org.uk\)](#)

[Middlewick Ranges: a wonderful site for wildlife we must not lose - CPRE Essex \(cpressex.org.uk\)](#)

2018 BTO paper showing results of 2012 survey and significance of Colchester Barracks population:

[Estimating national population sizes: Methodological challenges and applications illustrated in the common nightingale, a declining songbird in the UK - Hewson - 2018 - Journal of Applied Ecology - Wiley Online Library](#)

NOTES FOR EDITOR

For further information, interviews, or comments, please contact:

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Middlewick Ranges singing male nightingales:



Photo credit: Glyn Evans



Photo credit: Andrew Neal



Friends of Middlewick guided nightingale walk, 16th May 2024. Photo credit: Richard Martin



Friends of Middlewick guided nightingale walk, 16th May 2024. Photo credit: Martin Pugh



'Save the Wick!' Campaign photo with 80 defenders of Middlewick Ranges; ahead of a successful curated Jane's Walk around the site explaining the natural and civic history of Middlewick Ranges. Photo credit: Martin Pugh