



Fish, birds, water voles and newts could all face damaging drought impacts – says Environment Agency.

The traditional summer scene of dragonflies skimming over a glistening stream could be a rare sight in parts of England this year as the widespread drought begins to take its toll on the nation's wildlife. Dragonflies, warns the Environment Agency, are just one of the species that will be severely affected if the drought continues - along with water voles, great crested newts, and wading birds such as curlews and lapwings.

The Environment Agency will this week announce new measures to help protect nationally important wildlife sites. They will help wetland managers to maintain water levels in nationally important wetland sites during drought while protecting other licence holders. They include provisions to extend the licence season, make use of unused licensed water, or allowing higher pumping rates to capture water during any rainfall periods that occur.

Driest 18 months since records began

Some parts of the country have seen the driest 18 months since records began, and in drought affected areas it is likely that some streams, ponds and shallow lakes will be completely dry before aquatic insects like dragonflies are fully formed, and the insects will consequently perish. Newly hatched tadpoles from toads and frogs, as well as from protected great crested newts, face a similar fate.

Birds will also suffer as suitable wetland breeding sites for wading birds dry up. Waders such as Snipe, Redshank, Lapwing, Curlew and Black-tailed Godwit all need moist soils to probe with their long bills to extract food such as worms to feed themselves and their young. These

species have declined rapidly in much of England in recent decades and this spring drought could be the final straw in some of the smaller breeding sites.

The Environment Agency has already seen a number of fish deaths this year caused by dry weather, and is stepping up river monitoring and increasing its supplies of water aeration and fish rescue equipment in order to respond quickly to reports of distressed fish.

Alastair Driver, Environment Agency National Conservation Manager, said:

“The amount of water that we use at home and in our businesses has a direct effect on the amount of water available in our rivers and for wildlife. We would urge all water users – including consumers, businesses and farmers – to use water wisely to help protect our valuable natural environment.

“The Environment Agency is working with Natural England and other environmental organisations to actively monitor the environmental impact of the drought and is taking action to mitigate these impacts wherever possible. Nature is very resilient, but given that we are seeing early summer droughts like this happening more frequently, then we can expect to see the real impacts of climate change on the numbers and distribution of some of our more susceptible wildlife.”

Other impacts of drought on wildlife include a reduction in the numbers of water voles, as dwindling water levels in ditches and streams leave their burrows exposed to predators such as stoats and weasels. Long dry spells and low soil moisture levels can lead to the death of some trees - especially beech and birch, and fruits of trees and shrubs are likely to be smaller in size. Forest fires also become an increasing concern.

Helen Perkins, spokesperson for The Wildlife Trusts, said:

“There is no doubt that a wildlife tragedy is unfolding in parts of the country and wildlife is suffering the consequences of our unsustainable water use. We welcome the Environment Agency taking measures to enable water levels to be maintained at important wildlife sites.

“After such a long period of low rainfall, some species may not recover and could be lost from some rivers and wetlands if we don’t act now. We urgently need to change the way we use water at home and across businesses. Saving water now could save wildlife from an absolute disaster.”

Phil Burston, RSPB water policy officer, said:

“Wading birds like lapwings, redshank and avocets rely on shallow pools and boggy marshes. As we come into the breeding season, if these birds manage to breed at all, then their chicks will need to feed on the insects that live close to the edge of pools. If they dry up then the chicks will be forced to look elsewhere putting them in danger.

“Our reserves are designed to help wetlands and their wildlife cope with drought but we still need to do more to adapt to an increasingly unpredictable climate. The problem in the wider countryside outside managed nature reserves is likely to be even more desperate with wildlife that relies on healthy rivers, ponds and lakes left struggling this summer.”

Last week the Environment Agency published its drought prospects report, which warned that the drought could spread as far north as East Yorkshire and as far west as the Hampshire-Wiltshire border , if the dry weather continues this spring. The whole of the south east and east Anglia are already in drought.