



The Medicinal Leech *Hirudo medicinalis* largest of the 16 UK species of leech, up to 80 mm long at rest. The dorsal side has longitudinal red or yellow stripes set against a dark background, while the ventral side is yellow with irregular black markings. It is the only widespread species of leech in the UK that is capable of feeding on mammalian blood.

Medicinal leeches are found in permanent ponds and ditches with eutrophic water and sunny, well-vegetated shallow margins. They require a relatively high water temperature of at least 19°C for breeding to take place. Each adult lays up to seven egg cocoons above the water level, around the roots of marginal plants or in wildfowl nests. Cocoons contain up to 30 eggs, although typically 12–16, which hatch within 4–10 weeks. The medicinal leech is haematophagous, feeding exclusively on blood, so the habitat must also allow the leeches access to suitable host species. These include wild mammals, domestic livestock, birds, fish and amphibians. The latter are particularly important as both adults and larvae feed upon them, so ideally sites should support good populations of breeding amphibians. Tadpoles and newt larvae are especially important hosts for young leeches.

Nationally, the medicinal leech is highly localised and is found in around 20 regional clusters with particular concentrations in Cumbria, Dungeness and Romney Marsh, the New Forest and Anglesey. Medicinal leech is protected under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981). Its IUCN status is 'Near Threatened'.

In Herefordshire, medicinal leech has been recorded at three locations in the last 20 years: Lawn Pool, Moccas Park NNR (1998); Lower House Orchard, Staunton-on-Wye (2005/6); glacial kettle hole pond at Madley (2015). Historically they are thought to have occurred elsewhere in the county. All records have occurred in the glacial kettle hole moraine ponds in the north-west of the county.

Threats

- Habitat loss through infilling of ponds
- Hydrological issues, resulting in drying of ponds
- Small and isolated populations
- Habitat succession, resulting in over-shading of pond margins
- Loss of marginal vegetation for cocoon laying
- Lack of information on current distribution preventing protection and conservation actions

Current Action

- Casual survey at Moccas Park NNR 2015 (HART)
- FHT, HART) PondNet surveys at Lower House Orchard
- Planned habitat improvement work at Lower House Orchard (Heineken, HART)
- Project development for glacial kettle hole ponds in Herefordshire (HART, HWT)
- National survey methodology being developed in 2016 (FHT)

	Objective	Action
A	Locate and map existing sites	1
B	Focused long term management plans in place for known sites (2016-2020)	2
C	Establish a network of ponds and ditches with high quality habitat around the historical sites (2020)	3
D	Raise public awareness about the medicinal leech as part of a wider ponds project (HART, HWT)	3

	Actions	Target
1	Follow up historical records and re-survey known sites (FHT, HWT)	Annual
2	Encourage sympathetic management of habitats at known sites through guidance and advice (HART)	Annual
3	Investigate funding options for ponds project (HART, HWT)	2017

Lead Partner	FHT, HART, HWT
Key Partners	Heineken