

# Identifying lowland wet grassland:

existing and potential value of land for lowland breeding waders and for wintering waders and wildfowl.

The Farm Environment Plan (FEP) is an essential part of an application for Higher Level Stewardship. The FEP should record the presence and condition of all environmental features which may benefit from HLS management. See the ES website [www.defra.gov.uk/schemes/es](http://www.defra.gov.uk/schemes/es) for details and other guidance notes in this series.

This guidance note contains three keys to help identify FEP Features relating to birds of wet grassland. The keys are intended to support definitions found in Part 4 of the FEP Handbook. They are only intended for use in determining value for breeding or wintering birds in coastal and floodplain grazing marshes. These are areas of permanent grassland over 2ha, where water levels are managed to provide conditions for waders, wildfowl and other wetland species. They are more or less restricted to open floodplains in the lowlands, where water levels are controlled through a system of ditches.

Details of existing features should be given in Part 2 of the FEP (Features Data Sheet). Identification of potential value is given in Part 3 (Features at the Farm Scale).

**Key 1** is to determine whether the grassland currently provides suitable 'Habitat for lowland breeding waders'. The main criterion for determining this value is the presence of certain breeding birds. However, we accept that bird records will not always be available and that visits will not necessarily take place at the right time to compile records. Therefore, the second section of the key concentrates on the known habitat preferences of breeding waders. You will need the input of the landowner or manager to answer the questions in this section. The key also outlines the conditions that confer particular value on a site and Advisers will take these into account when drawing up an agreement.

**Key 2** is similar in structure to **Key 1** and should be used to identify whether the grassland provides suitable 'Habitat for wintering waders and wildfowl'. You will find that if a site has suitable habitat for breeding waders, it almost always has habitat for wintering waders and

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wildfowl. However there are many sites, where water levels drop rapidly in the spring, or where grazing pressure is high, that only have habitat for wintering birds. Note that lapwing and snipe are excluded from the indicator species list because they are by no means restricted to coastal and floodplain grazing marsh.

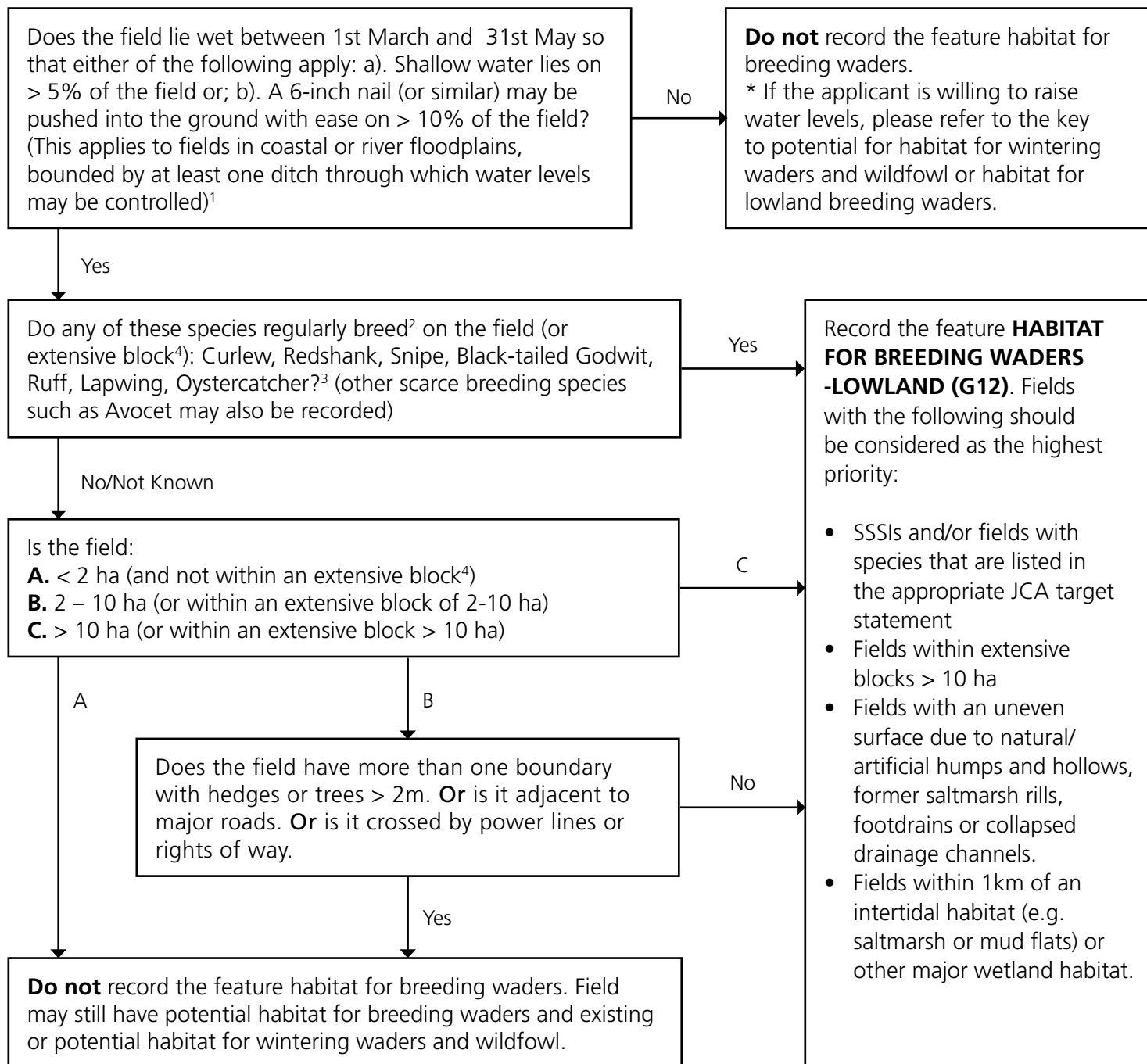
**Key 3** looks at the potential value of either an existing grassland (where water levels could be raised) or arable fields (where grassland could be re-established and water levels raised) for both breeding and/or wintering birds. It uses the intrinsic properties of the field, but requires consultation with the Environment Agency in order to answer questions over water supply and management.

You should note that these keys are for guidance only and any one key cannot reflect all the subtleties of local variation. You may therefore vary from the guidance in exceptional circumstances and explain your reasoning on the FEP form. You should also note that identification of a feature is a separate process to determining an HLS option. Different regions will have different priorities and the final decision on the scope and nature of the management options lies with the Adviser. In some areas, in particular within lowland valleys in Less Favoured Areas, you should consult your local Adviser before recommending lowland wet grassland options.

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## GRASSLAND KEYS (LOWLAND WET GRASSLAND) - KEY 1

To identify the feature G12 Habitat for breeding waders - lowland and to determine suitability for entry to grassland option HK9 Maintenance of wet grassland for breeding waders.



<sup>1</sup> The 2005 FEP handbook allows this feature to be recorded on dry grassland in the floodplain. This key provides additional clarification that the grassland must be wet before this habitat for breeding waders can be recorded. FEP surveyors may inadvertently record this feature on dry grassland. However, there is a fail-safe - the condition assessment includes a 'wetness' indicator which will prevent dry grassland coming into the maintenance option (HK9).

<sup>2</sup> 'Regularly breed' means that a bird has exhibited territorial behaviour or raised young, in the previous year or in at least two of the last five years, provided there has not been a major change in management since the last observation.

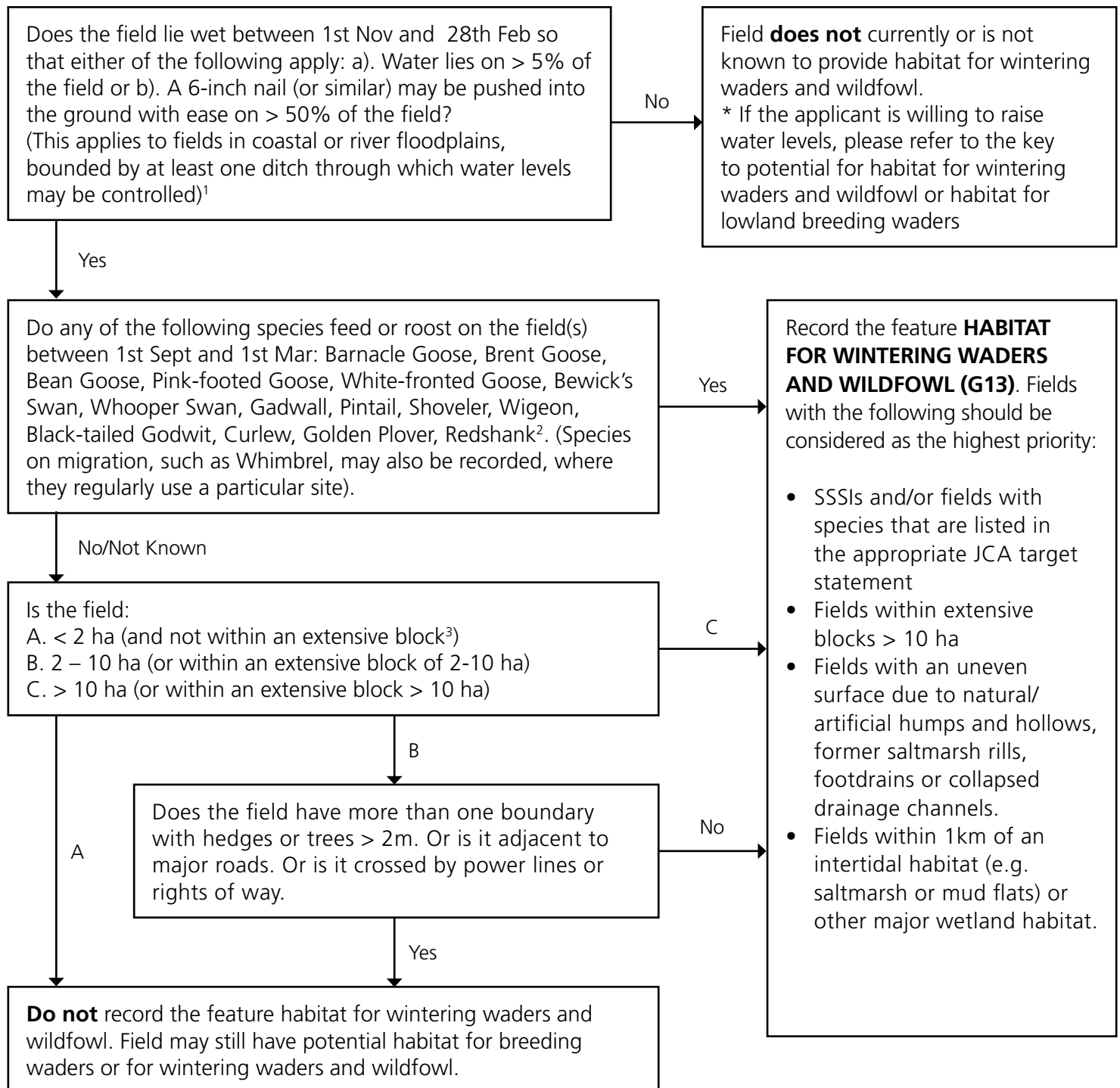
<sup>3</sup> Details of species records should be provided. Sites that support only lapwing or oystercatcher in the absence of other species are likely to be given a lower priority than those supporting the other species which have more exacting habitat requirements.

<sup>4</sup> 'Extensive block' means an open block of grass or arable land of which the field is part, provided that block is not intersected by a change in topography, by major roads (class A or above) or by any hedges, lines of trees, blocks of scrub or other internal structures (excluding low wire fencing and isolated trees or scrub).

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## GRASSLAND KEYS (LOWLAND WET GRASSLAND) - KEY 2

To identify the feature G13 Habitat for wintering waders and wildfowl and to determine suitability for entry to option HK10 Maintenance of wet grassland for wintering waders and wildfowl.



<sup>1</sup> The 2005 FEP handbook allows this feature to be recorded on dry grassland in the floodplain. This key provides additional clarification that the grassland must be wet before this habitat for wintering waders and wildfowl can be recorded. FEP surveyors may inadvertently record this feature on dry grassland. However, there is a fail-safe - the condition assessment includes a 'wetness' indicator which will prevent dry grassland coming into the maintenance option (HK10). Dry grassland used, for example, by foraging geese or wintering waders may be eligible for options HK15-17 (outside LFAs).

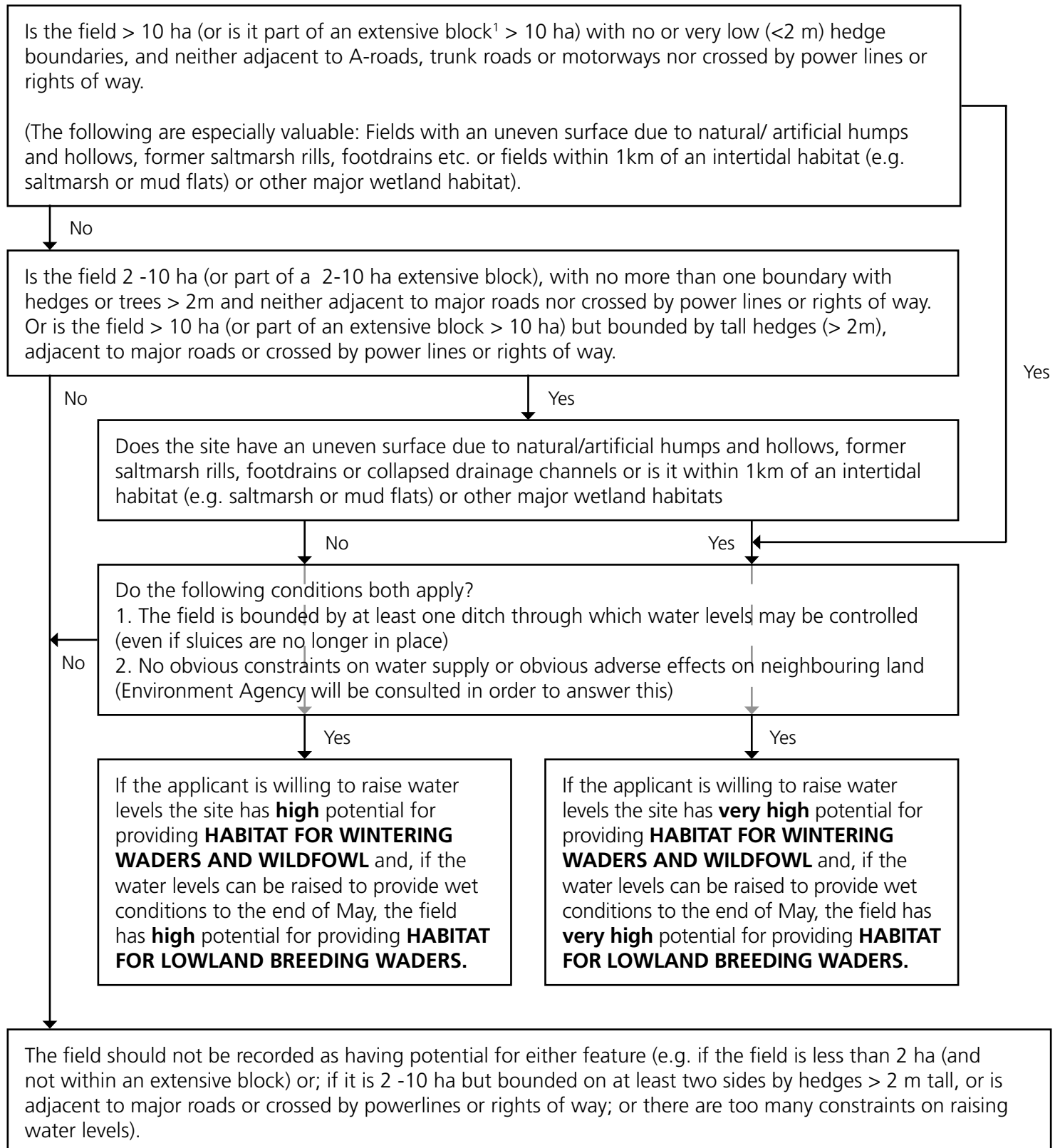
<sup>2</sup> Details of species records should be provided

<sup>3</sup> 'Extensive block' means an open block of grass or arable land of which the field is part, provided that block is not intersected by a change in topography, by major roads (class A or above) or by any hedges, lines of trees, blocks of scrub or other internal structures (excluding low wire fencing and isolated trees or scrub).

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## GRASSLAND KEYS (LOWLAND WET GRASSLAND) - KEY 3

To identify **POTENTIAL** for the following features G12 Habitat for lowland breeding waders and G13 Habitat for wintering waders and wildfowl and to determine suitability for entry to grassland options HK11-14.



<sup>1</sup> 'Extensive block' means an open block of grass or arable land of which the field is part, provided that block is not intersected by a change in topography, by major roads (class A or above) or by any hedges or other internal structures (excluding wire fencing).