



Bedfordshire and Luton Habitat Action Plan: Lowland Meadow

Updated October 2008



Lowland meadow

National lead organisation(s):
Natural England

County lead organisation(s):
The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire,
Northamptonshire and Peterborough

A wide-ranging approach is adopted in this plan to lowland grasslands treated as lowland meadows. They are taken to include most forms of species rich neutral grassland. In terms of National Vegetation Classification plant communities lowland meadows are primarily MG5 crested dogtail/knapweed grasslands, MG4 meadow foxtail/great burnet floodplain meadow and MG8 crested dogtail/kingcup flood-pasture. Similar grasslands are found in recreational sites, churchyards, roadside verges and a variety of other localities. In such circumstances the habitat may never have been subject to the agricultural regimes of the classic habitat and may appear rather atypical, but would never-the-less be described as species rich neutral grassland.

Scope

The plan concentrates on meadows, pastures and areas of species rich neutral grassland associated with low-input nutrient regimes, and covers the major forms of neutral grassland which have a specialist group of scarce and declining plant species. Among flowering plants, these include cowslip, dyer's greenweed, green-winged orchid, and pepper saxifrage. It includes a range of grasslands on lime rich soils above chalk and limestone substrate as well as meadows that have formed on richer soils overlying the acidic sands of the greensand ridge. Within floodplains the habitat is closely related to floodplain grazing marsh.

Current status

National status

Unimproved neutral grassland habitat has undergone a remarkable decline in the 20th century, almost entirely due to changing agricultural practice. It is estimated that by 1984 in lowland England and Wales, semi-natural grassland had declined by 97% over the previous 50 years to approximately 0.2million ha. Losses have continued during the 1980s and 1990s, and have been recorded at 2 -10% per annum in some parts of England.





Local status

The phase 1 habitat survey carried out in Bedfordshire and Luton in 1987/88 revealed just 87 hectares of unimproved neutral grassland and 113 hectares of marsh or marshy grassland. Grassland containing some elements of lowland meadow vegetation was described as semi-improved neutral grassland during the phase 1 survey. Over 8000 hectares of this habitat were recorded together with a further 8000 hectares of agriculturally improved grassland.

Neutral grassland or lowland meadow occurs as an important element in 10 of the 40 Sites of Special Scientific Interest in the County but is generally regarded as the dominant reason for SSSI status in just five of those sites. Many of the remaining species rich areas of lowland meadow have been identified as County Wildlife Sites with approaching 100 CWS having this habitat as a primary reason for their status. Whilst almost 70% of the SSSI lowland meadows are in favourable condition the situation of the many small CWS sites is worrying. A sample survey of 580 hectares of the estimated 1285 hectares of the habitat within CWS has revealed just 4% in favourable condition.

Current factors affecting lowland meadows

- Abandonment of marginal agricultural land
- Intensified agricultural production including drainage, fertiliser applications, spraying of broadleaved herbicides and reseeded
- Inappropriate grazing due to timing or livestock type and density, in particular intensive horse management
- Under-grazing
- Housing and infrastructure development
- Atmospheric nitrogen deposition
- Silage production and abolition of traditional hay cuts
- The gradual removal of the old Countryside Stewardship Scheme and uncertainty about alternative means of funding traditional management practices in the new agri-environment regime

Current action

Management

- A number of key lowland meadows are already managed by local authorities or conservation organisations
- Lowland meadow management has been a target area for the old Countryside Stewardship Scheme and many site owners receive extra resources via stewardship for lowland meadow management. The new Higher Level Scheme also provides money for meadow management.
- The Wildlife Trust have employed a wildlife sites officer with a specific grassland remit
- The new GrazeBeds website helps link landowners and graziers





Advisory services

Advice on managing lowland meadows, management for particular species and potential sources of funding is available from the following organisations:

- The Wildlife Trust
- Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG)
- Natural England
- The Greensand Trust
- Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity

Action plan objectives and targets

Objectives

Maintain and where possible expand the range of lowland meadows in Bedfordshire and Luton

Maintain and where possible improve the condition of lowland meadows in Bedfordshire and Luton

Targets

- A. Maintain the current extent of lowland meadow in Bedfordshire and Luton identified as SSSI and CWS
- B. Achieve favourable or recovering condition of 100% of SSSI and 20% of CWS lowland meadows by 2012. 40% of CWS lowland meadows to be in favourable or recovering condition by 2020
- C. Assess by 2012 the distribution and condition of lowland meadow in Bedfordshire and Luton
- D. Restore **X ha** of lowland meadow from semi-improved grassland with at least 50% in the Chilterns, Flit Valley north Bedfordshire by 2020
- E. Create **X ha** of lowland meadow from arable or improved grassland with at least 50% in the Chilterns, Flit Valley and north Bedfordshire by 2020
- F. 75% of the newly created or restored lowland meadow to be adjacent to existing lowland meadow or other semi-natural habitat
- G. 50% of newly created or restored meadow habitat to contribute to resultant habitat patches of 2ha or more of lowland meadow



Proposed action

Abbreviations

| | | | |
|------|--|-----|---------------------|
| BCC | Bedfordshire County Council | GST | The Greensand Trust |
| BRCC | Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity | LA | Local authorities |
| CTT | Community Tree Trust | NE | Natural England |
| FWAG | Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group | WT | Wildlife Trust |

| Action | Implemented by |
|--------|----------------|
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Site safeguard and management

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| 1. Secure by 2010 lowland meadow restoration schemes within at least five mineral and waste restoration sites | LA |
| 2. Update and implement by 2008 the highway authority road verge management regime | LA |
| 3. Establish by 2010 a local meadow wildflower seed collection scheme | WT CTT? |

Advisory

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| 4. Contact by 2010 all owners of lowland meadow County Wildlife Sites to offer management and/or grant advice and promote the value of their land | WT, GST, BRCC, FWAG |
| 5. Offer management and/or grant advice to owners of at least 80 lowland meadows by 2010, focusing where possible on designated sites in unfavourable condition | WT, FWAG |
| 6. Offer management and/or grant advice by 2012 to owners of at least 40 sites capable of restoration to lowland meadow | WT |
| 7. Conduct by 2010 two workshops – one in the south of the county and one in the north – for horse owners about best practice management of horse grazed meadows | WT, FWAG |
| 8. Offer advice on meadow creation to 20 owners of land adjacent to existing meadows in Chilterns, Flit Valley and north Bedfordshire target areas by 2020 | WT, FWAG |



Future research and monitoring

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| 9. By 2010 develop a standard monitoring method and record sheet for lowland meadows | BCC, WT, GST, BRCC |
| 10. Reassess by 2010 the condition of all road verge nature reserves and recommend future management regimes | BCC |
| 11. By 2012 produce a digitised map of lowland meadow habitat creation and restoration opportunities in Bedfordshire and Luton | BRMC |
| 12. By 2012 research the economic/commercial opportunities for species-rich lowland meadow hay, meat, wool, flower seed and other products | WT, LBAP |

Communication and publicity

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| 13. Ensure that by 2015 all lowland meadows with public access have on-site interpretation about the importance to the habitat of traditional stock grazing and hay making methods | LA, WT, GST, BRCC |
| 14. Ensure the continued functioning and development of the GrazeBeds website linking landowners and graziers and allowing the sharing of resources in Bedfordshire | WT |
| 15. Prepare for local and/or trade publications at least one article annually on lowland meadow and grazing issues | WT, LBAP, FWAG |
| 16. Promote through the GrazeBeds and BAP websites, and a series of events and publications the value of products arising from the management of local high quality grassland sites | WT |





Monitoring the Action Plan

The Wildlife Trust will keep implementation of the plan under review and individuals or organisations signed up to specific actions will report via the national Biodiversity Action Reporting System (BARS).

Complementary plans

A national action plan exists for lowland meadows.

Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire and Northamptonshire have also written action plans for lowland meadow or neutral grassland.

This action plan links to other Bedfordshire and Luton habitat action plans, in particular those for hedgerows, floodplain grazing marsh, farmland birds and great-crested newt.

References

PHASE I HABITAT SURVEY REF

