



Bedfordshire and Luton Habitat Action Plan: Lowland Dry Acid Grassland

Updated June 2008



Lowland dry acid grassland

National lead organisation(s):
Natural England

County lead organisation(s):
The Greensand Trust
Bedfordshire Heathland Forum

Lowland acid grassland is characterised by a range of grasses and herbs, and in East Anglia the typical community is NVC U1. It is closely related to heathland habitat and often forms integral communities with it.

Current status

National status

Acid grasslands are probably one of the most extensive semi-natural habitats in Britain. Estimates suggest that there is in excess of 1,200,000 ha of acid grassland in the uplands, but only about 30,000 ha in the lowlands. Lowland acid grassland is becoming increasingly scarce in Britain.

It is important to recognise that, whilst occurring as a habitat in its own right, acid grassland frequently occurs as an integral part of a mosaic habitat with lowland heathland, where it can form diverse and distinct communities.

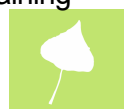
Local status

Acid grasslands occur along the geological outcrop of acidic, mostly sandy soils known as the Greensand Ridge or the Woburn Sands Outcrop. These acidic soils are low in nutrients and occur on superficial deposits like sand and gravel. NVC communities U1 and U2 both occur with sub-communities U1b, U1e and U2a. Varied communities of plant, invertebrate and other wildlife species can all occur, and as part of a heathland mosaic habitat it can become even richer in species diversity. The nationally rare proliferous pink *Petrorhagia prolifera* occurs in acid grassland near Potton.

In Bedfordshire, acid grassland is regarded as a rare and threatened resource and the county total has declined from several hundred hectares to approximately 130 ha (0.01%) of the county's land area. The county's acid grassland sites occur in three 'clusters':

- A large number of sites around the Brickhills and Woburn area
- Ampthill and Maulden
- Around Sandy and Gamlingay

In south Bedfordshire small areas of acid grassland occur on clay-with-flints which cap the chalk and can be found in conjunction with other calcareous grasslands. The sites remaining





either contain or may have formerly contained relict acid grassland vegetation. However most of these sites now consist of neutral grassland. The possibility of restoring acidic vegetation can be encouraged by positive management which benefits particular species. Examples include Hudnall Corner County Wildlife Site (CWS), Whipsnade Heath CWS, Stockwood Park CWS, Studham Common CWS and Whipsnade Green.

Current factors affecting acid grassland

- Lack of management, considered to be the chief cause of heathland loss and decline. An absence of grazing, cutting, mowing or prescribed burning has resulted in the many sites becoming overgrown with scrub, dense stands of bracken or other coarse, aggressive plant species.
- Inappropriate management, e.g., tree planting, which can cause the habitat to deteriorate from shading
- Visitor pressure, usually a problem only at sites which have public access and are near large towns where, due to the nature of the habitat, numbers of walkers, particularly dog walkers, can be attracted. Large numbers of visitors with dogs have important implications for site management, as grazing is not a viable proposition for sites with extensive public access as the safety of grazing animals cannot be guaranteed.

Sites that are heavily disturbed can become compacted. Where trampling is heavy erosion of the light, sandy soils can occur. Many species are sensitive to disturbance and will stop breeding or existing where pressures become too high. Sites with intensive public access include Stockgrove Country Park and Ampthill Park.

- Isolation of sites, reducing the opportunity for animals and plants to disperse, particularly the less mobile species. Greensand Ridge acid grassland sites are quite isolated, and there is little chance of colonisation or recolonisation by species from outside the area.
- Size of sites: small size of remaining habitat fragments makes the resident species much more susceptible to extinction from accidental fire, habitat changes or population crashes. Human intervention will be needed to reintroduce species that were once present but have been lost.

Current action

Site protection

There are 55 sites with acid grassland habitat, eleven of which are Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). In most cases acid grassland forms only part of the interest of the SSSI. A further 32 sites are designated as CWS or, in Buckinghamshire, Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC).

Management

Four of Bedfordshire's acid grassland sites are managed by Bedfordshire County Council as Roadside Nature Reserves: Fox Corner, Ampthill Bypass, Warren Wood and Potton Church.





At least 29 sites are in private ownership. Some are sensitively managed however others need advice and encouragement/funding to enable landowners to manage the sites.

Action plan objectives and targets

Objectives

Maintain and where possible expand the range of acid grassland in Bedfordshire

Maintain and where possible improve the condition of acid grassland in Bedfordshire

Targets

- A. Maintain the 2005 extent (131 ha) and condition of acid grassland in Bedfordshire and Luton
- B. Achieve by 2020 favourable condition on 15 ha of acid grassland, and on an additional 37.5 ha by 2030
- C. Restore by 2015 32.5 ha of currently degraded or relict acid grassland
- D. Re-establish by 2020 10 ha of acid grassland from neglected, semi-improved or improved grassland, or arable land.



Proposed action

Abbreviations

BCC	Bedfordshire County Council	GST	The Greensand Trust
BRCC	Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity	NE	Natural England
FC	Forestry Commission	WT	Wildlife Trust

Action	Implemented by
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Site safeguard and management

1. Restore Readshill Grassland (0.3 ha), and continue restoration of Sandy Pinnacle (2.0 ha) and Maulden Heath and Grasslands (30 ha), to meet the BAP habitat definition by 2015	GST, BRCC
2. Maintain and improve the condition of Wavendon Heath Ponds and Meadows (4.9 ha), Grange Meadow Haynes (2 ha), the Ouzel Valley (7 ha) and Double Arches Complex (1 ha), to bring them into favourable condition by 2020	GST, BCC, WT
3. Create by 2020 10 ha of acid grassland at Sandy Smith Nature Reserve	GST
4. Achieve by 2010 favourable condition of Ampthill Bypass RNR, Fox Corner RNR and Warren Wood RNR (0.1 ha)	BCC
5. Bring Maulden Church Meadow into favourable condition by 2010	BCC, GST
6. Bring the acid grassland at Flitwick Moor (0.3 ha) into favourable condition by 2020	WT
7. By 2009 prepare new management plans for Maulden Heath and Grasslands, Ampthill Park, Double Arches Complex and Tiddenfoot Park.	GST, BCC, NE
8. By 2011 prepare new management plans for Churchway's Quarry and King's Wood	GST, NE
9. By 2012 prepare new management plans for Maulden Church Meadow and Sandy Smith Nature Reserve	GST, NE, BCC

Advisory

10. Work closely with Ampthill Town Council to bring Ampthill Park (37.5 ha) into favourable condition by 2030	GST, BCC
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11. Provide advice and support as needed to ensure continued positive management of Sandy Cemetery (1.6 ha), Bury Farm, Houghton Conquest (5 ha), Woburn Park (40 ha) and Utcoate Grange Meadow (2.1 ha)	GST, WT, NE
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Future research and monitoring

12. Produce by 2010 a refined digitised map of acid grassland habitat opportunities in the county	BRMC
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Monitoring the Action Plan

The Heathland Forum will monitor this action plan annually.

Complementary plans

A national action plan exists for lowland acid grassland.

Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire have also written action plans for acid grassland.

This action plan links to other Bedfordshire and Luton habitat action plans, in particular those for lowland heathland, lowland meadow and lowland calcareous grassland.

Acknowledgements

The Greensand Trust and BAP Coordinator have compiled this action plan with assistance from the Bedfordshire Heathland Forum. For more information please contact the Biodiversity Partnership Coordinator. Members of the Heathland Forum include: Bedfordshire County Council, Mid Beds District Council, South Beds District Council, Buckinghamshire County Council, Aylesbury Vale District Council, RSPB, the Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Bedfordshire Natural History Society, Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity, Lafarge, Bedfordshire Reptile and Amphibian Group, Forestry Commission and Natural England.

References

UK BAP Partnership. 2008. National Action Plan – lowland dry acid grassland [ONLINE] http://www.ukbap-reporting.org.uk/plans/national_plan.asp?HAP=%7B698AFFFA%2DDADB%2D41DE%2DA854%2D1456DF8D9DAC%7D. Accessed 28 May 2008.

