

Lowland dry acid grassland

Acid grassland occurs on the nutrient-poor, freely-draining soils with a pH ranging from 4-5.5. It is found mainly in the Sandlings and Breckland areas of Suffolk.

1 Definition

This plan includes all the acid grassland which occurs in Suffolk as an integral part of the Sandlings and Breckland heathland landscape. Smaller areas of acid grassland can also be found on stretches of vegetated shingle along the coast.

Acid grassland is characterised by a species-poor plant community dominated by sheep's fescue, sheep's sorrel and common bent. Other species which are often present in the sward include sand sedge, wavy hair grass, tormentil, and heath bedstraw. The summer-parched soils in Suffolk often support stands of acid grassland which are rich in both mosses and lichens. In addition, acid grassland in Suffolk is noted for a number of rare and nationally scarce spring annual plants. These include several clovers e.g. clustered and suffocated, mossy stonecrop and in the Breckland area, a number of early flowering plants such as spring and breckland speedwells. Birds of conservation concern which are associated with acid grassland include woodlark, stone-curlew and nightjar. Many of the invertebrates occurring in acid grassland are species which do not occur elsewhere. Ground-dwelling and burrowing invertebrates particularly favour the open acid grassland swards which typically contain bare sandy areas.



substantial loss of acid grassland in the county. Extensive afforestation in the Sandlings and Breckland has also contributed to the drastic loss of the habitat. Further losses can be attributed to an increase in urban development particularly around Ipswich. Recent assessments of the county's resource of this habitat are 820 hectares (2.7% of the national resource).

2 Current status

2.1 Local

The loss of unimproved acid grassland mirrors the loss of other unimproved grassland types in Suffolk. Agricultural intensification, particularly the use of agrochemicals and irrigation has resulted in a

2.2 Natural Areas

Suffolk Coast and Heaths, Breckland and the Fens, East Anglian Plain.

3 Current factors affecting the habitat in Suffolk

- Agricultural improvements through ploughing and reseeding, liming, irrigation, fertiliser and herbicide applications.

- Reduction in the rabbit population leading to an encroachment of open acid grassland heath with self-sown pines, birch and bracken.
- Afforestation.
- Mineral extraction.
- Other development including airbases, housing, roads, golf courses.
- Atmospheric pollution, the effects of which have not been fully assessed.

1 *Maintain extent of ecologically valuable acid grassland.*

2 *Secure restoration management for all significant stands of acid grassland with the aim of achieving favourable status by 2010.*

3 *Seek to promote the establishment of acid grassland through agri-environment schemes or wherever feasible as part of new developments such as industrial or housing estates.*

4 Current action

- A number of Special Protection Areas (SPAs) in Suffolk e.g. Minsmere-Walberswick Heaths and Marshes contain stands of acid grassland where they form part of a complex mosaic of important habitats.
- Significant areas of acid grassland are designated as SSSI or non-statutory sites (County Wildlife Sites).
- Significant areas of acid grassland are in coastal areas and being regenerated in Breckland.
- Agri-environment schemes in Suffolk i.e the Environmentally Sensitive Areas scheme and the Countryside Stewardship scheme provide the main financial incentives to encourage appropriate management of unimproved grassland.
- The Sandlings, Suffolk Coasts and Heaths and the Breckland projects manage extensive areas of heathland which include a significant proportion of the acid grassland resource.
- Project Officers also provide landowners with advice on conservation management and grant aid where appropriate.

5 Action plan objectives and targets

6 Proposed action with key local partners

| ACTION | KEY LOCAL PARTNERS | TIMETABLE | | | | |
|---|--|-----------|------|------|------|------|
| | | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 |
| A. Policy and Legislation | | | | | | |
| Ensure that conservation requirements are taken into account in the review and development of agri-environment schemes | MAFF/FRCA | * | * | * | * | * |
| Support policies in the Structure Plan, Local Plans and other policy documents such as forestry management and planting schemes to conserve acid grassland and protect from damaging developments | SCC, LAs, FE, SWT | * | * | * | * | * |
| Develop strategies to enhance and create acid grassland in environmental appraisals and as part of development schemes | LAs, SWT, SCC | * | * | * | * | * |
| B. Site safeguard and management | | | | | | |
| Secure favourable management of SSSIs where acid grassland occurs | EN | * | * | * | * | * |
| Develop new management techniques e.g. for weed control or grazing registers to encourage appropriate management | SWT, SCC, FWAG, Countryside Projects | * | * | * | * | * |
| Secure positive management on acid grassland sites both in private and public ownership and in the ownership of conservation organisations | SWT, SCC, FWAG, MAFF/FRCA, FE, MoD, RSPB | * | * | * | * | * |
| Seek the implementation of relevant species action plans associated with acid grassland | SWT, RSPB, FWAG | * | * | * | * | * |
| Monitor sites in agri-environment schemes to ensure sites are being maintained in a favourable condition | SWT, MAFF/FRCA, FWAG | * | * | * | * | * |
| D. Advisory | | | | | | |
| Continue to provide conservation advice to landowners and managers of acid grassland sites | SWT, SCC, FWAG, MAFF/FRCA, RSPB | * | * | * | * | * |

| ACTION | KEY LOCAL PARTNERS | TIMETABLE | | | | |
|---|---------------------------|-----------|------|------|------|------|
| | | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 |
| Encourage, develop and disseminate best practice for management of dry grassland to promote the integration of conservation management into agricultural practice | SWT, SCC, FWAG, RSPB | * | * | * | * | * |
| E. Future research and monitoring | | | | | | |
| Continue to monitor condition of all acid grassland sites | SWT, FWAG, SCC, RSPB | * | * | * | * | * |
| Review research on the effects of climate change and atmospheric pollution on acid grassland | SWT, RSPB | * | * | * | * | * |
| Monitor conservation benefits of agri-environment schemes on acid grassland as part of national efforts | FRCA, MAFF/FWAG, SWT, SCC | * | * | * | * | * |
| F. Communications and publicity | | | | | | |
| Seek opportunities to present conservation of acid grassland in press and popular media | SWT, RSPB, SCC | * | * | * | * | * |
| Encourage public access for education and recreation activities on acid grassland sites where appropriate and through countryside stewardship | SWT, RSPB, SCC, MAFF/FRCA | * | * | * | * | * |