

SUFFOLK LOCAL BIODIVERSITY ACTION PLAN

Lowland Meadow

Plan Lead SWT

1 Definition of habitat or species

This plan incorporates a number of unimproved grassland types in Suffolk. Of particular ecological value are the species-rich hay meadows associated with the boulder clay soils of the county. Often termed 'Old meadows', these grasslands are characterised by a long history of traditional management by hay making and have not been altered through ploughing or the use of agricultural chemicals. The plan is not restricted to grasslands that are cut for hay but also includes unimproved neutral pasture where livestock grazing is the main land use.

In addition to a wide range of flowering plants and mosses, unimproved grasslands are habitat for other groups including invertebrates, birds and small mammals

2 Current status: national, regional, and local (including trends and losses)

The loss of unimproved grassland in Suffolk (96% since 1939) mirrors the drastic loss that has occurred elsewhere in lowland England and Wales. In 1984, it was estimated that semi-natural grassland had declined by 97% over the past 50 years. It is now estimated that only 15000 hectares of species-rich neutral grassland remains in the UK. In Suffolk recent estimates indicate that there are less than 2000ha of the resource left.

The typical plant community (MG5 in the National Vegetation Classification) of hay meadows and pastures on Suffolk boulder clay soils is now localised, fragmented and in small stands. In Suffolk there is less than 100 hectares remaining, 2% of the national resource. In non-agricultural settings, good examples can be found in churchyards, on road verges and village greens and commons. MG4 wet grassland would also be included in this plan.

3 Current factors affecting the species or habitats

Although largely an historical influence, agricultural improvement remains a threat at some sites: drainage, ploughing, reseeding, fertiliser treatment and application of herbicides.

Neglect through a decline in the level of livestock grazing and the low agricultural value of hay and species-rich pasture.

Isolation within the farmed landscape – very few meadows are part of a mixed farm system, being instead isolated within an intensive arable system making grazing/haycutting difficult and uneconomic.

Reduction in the availability of appropriate type and size of farm machinery for traditional hay making on small sites.

Abandonment leading to rank over growth and scrub encroachment

Changes in plant communities through inappropriate grazing/cutting regimes e.g. intensive grazing (often horse) or regular topping.

Dehydration through lowered water tables due to surface and ground water abstraction and effects of drought.

Lack of resources/labour for long term appropriate management of non-agricultural sites e.g. churchyards

Eutrophication through atmospheric pollution and run-off (particularly salient to RNRs)

Climate change apparently increasing growth rates and therefore altering/increasing necessary management

4 Current action

Just under 2000 hectares of unimproved neutral grassland are designated as SSSI or as non statutory site (County Wildlife Sites). These designations help attract grant funding for management in the new Environmental Stewardship scheme.

The former agri-environment schemes in Suffolk i.e. the Environmentally Sensitive Areas scheme and the Countryside Stewardship scheme continue to provide financial incentive to encourage appropriate management of unimproved grassland and have played a vital role in maintaining the condition of many sites. As these schemes come to a close, it is hoped that the new Environmental Stewardship Scheme will provide similar support.

The Suffolk Wildlife Trust Unimproved grassland project aims to provide landowners of grassland sites with advice on conservation management and grant aid. Regular contact is maintained with County Wildlife Site owners, private nature reserve owners and communities to ensure that grassland sites are managed appropriately. A graziers database and a hay cutters database has been set up to help facilitate management of grassland sites.

Promoting the importance of unimproved grasslands helps ensure their correct management. Suffolk Wildlife Trust offers training and information on grassland management including courses on churchyard management and community grassland and a range of fact sheets on grassland management and creation.

The protected Roadside Nature Reserve scheme has been reviewed and revitalised by SCC and all grassland RNRs are now designated as CWSs.

Countryside Management projects and volunteers provide significant practical help in managing a number of sites publicly and privately owned including County Wildlife Sites.

The extent of the resource of herb-rich grassland has been increased through a number of grassland creation projects across the county using green hay and the SWT/Natural England seed harvester to collect seed from CWSs and SSSI unimproved grassland. It is estimated that to date 2.5 hectares has been created in the last two years.

5 Targets

Maintain as a minimum the current extent of unimproved grassland resource of approximately 2000 ha in Suffolk for 2010, 2015 and 2020

Expand the current resource of unimproved grassland resource by creating 0.5 –1ha of new herb-rich grassland per annum up to 2010 through green hay and seed harvesting.

Aim to restore and therefore reduce the number/area of sites currently in unfavourable condition.

Baseline 2005, targets for 2010, and identify targets for long term species or habitat viability for 2015 and 2020 and longer term (if desired)

6 Actions

Action (apply SMART approach and include locations where relevant).	Achieve by date	Delivery partners (identify lead and support partners)
Policy & Legislation		
Ensure that the LDF documents incorporate the lowland meadow BAP targets.	2006-7	SCC, LAs, NE, SWT.
Site safeguard and management Or species protection/management		
Ensure that the conservation requirements of unimproved lowland meadows continue to be taken into account and targeted in Environmental Stewardship applications	2006-2010	NE, SWT, FWAG
Maintain and develop grazing and haycutters database to facilitate sympathetic management	2006-2010	SWT/FWAG
Investigate uses/disposal of cut and collected material that is not suitable for hay e.g. community composting, local authority recycling	2006-2010	SWT/LA

Continue to target and support landowners of unimproved grassland to take up Environmental Stewardship	2006-2010	SWT/NE/FWAG
Encourage the creation of buffer habitat (through Environmental Stewardship) around unimproved grassland not only to protect from factors such as spray drift, but also to make them a more viable grazing/haycutting unit e.g create some dry winter grazing grassland near a wet grassland that needs summer conservation grazing	2006-2010	SWT/FWAG/NE
Create linking habitats between unimproved grassland to make them part of the wider ecological networks Integrate with opportunities generated by ES e.g. grass margins	2006-2010	SWT/FWAG/NE
Create new grasslands using local sources of green hay/harvested seed to expand the extent of herb-rich grassland (Target 1 new site a year)	2006-2010	SWT/NE/FWAG
Research and monitoring		
Maintain a programme of site visits to non-statutory unimproved grassland sites in agri- environment schemes to ensure sites are maintained in favourable condition	2006-2010	SWT/FWAG
Maintain a programme of site visits to non-statutory unimproved grassland sites not in agri- environment schemes to assess condition and increase number in favourable condition	2006-2010	SWT
Monitor SSSI grassland under common standards monitoring scheme	2006-2010	NE
Advisory		
Provide advice to landowners and managers of unimproved grassland including statutory and non statutory sites, churchyards, commons, community sites and road verges	2006-2010	SWT/NE /FWAG/SCC
Encourage, develop and disseminate best practice for management of unimproved grassland to promote the integration of conservation into agricultural practice, including through agri-environment schemes	2006-2010	SWT/NE/ FWAG
Advise on grassland creation opportunities	2006-2010	SWT/FWAG

to ensure use of locally sourced seed		
Communications and publicity		
Where it is compatible with the conservation value of sites, encourage public access, particularly where they are focal to the community e.g. churchyards	2006-2010	SWT/NE
Seek opportunities to promote conservation of unimproved grasslands e.g. through publications such as ES newsletter, CLA magazine, Site matters etc	2006-2010	NE/SWT/FWAG/SCC
Run training courses in grassland management for both agricultural scale sites and for smaller community and private sites	2006-2010	SWT/FWAG
Promote community involvement in grassland management through work parties in churchyards and community grassland sites.	2006-2010	SWT/SCC
Highlight the importance of unimproved grassland through awards such as the East Anglian Wildflower Award and the FWAG awards	2006-2010	SWT

NB Most of the action achieve by dates are 2006-2010 this means they need to be achieved or worked towards by 2006 and annually renewed until 2010.

Objectives currently not achievable by the plan partners:

This section should include objectives that the working group relevant to this plan would like to fund and achieve but due to constraints can't currently. By recognising these in the plan, means they aren't lost from the BAP : A list of bullet points

Setting up a hay cutting machinery ring for small landowners

Monitoring of progress:

Reported annually on the UK BAP reporting system BARS Biodiversity Action Reporting system.

List of organisations that have been consulted regarding this plan and have agreed to aim to deliver their organisations commitments:

SWT Susan Stone and Dorothy Casey
NE Monica O'Donnell and Alison Collins
All District Council SBP Representatives
Suffolk County Council Andrew Murray-Wood
SBRC Martin Sanford
Suffolk biodiversity partnership officer Mary Norden
FWAG Phil Watson
RSPB Kirsty Coutts
SOG Steve Piotrowski