



SPECIES RICH GRASSLAND

Introduction

Species rich grassland is the broad term used to describe grassland habitats of high nature conservation interest, which are those that have not been subject to agricultural improvement or intensive management.

The term encompasses three UK priority habitat types that occur in Bristol – lowland meadows, lowland calcareous grassland, and lowland acid grassland – more commonly known as neutral, calcareous and acid grassland. In the context of this plan it also encompasses lowland heath. Species rich grassland supports the UK priority species skylark, although its distribution is now extremely limited in Bristol.

In Bristol, areas of species rich grassland of high nature conservation interest can be found in a variety of locations across the city. The most outstanding is the Avon Gorge, which is internationally recognised for this interest and regarded as one of the top three botanical sites in the country.

Traditionally, many of these grasslands would have been grazed or cut for hay. Today, a number are managed for conservation with a summer hay cut; benefiting both wildlife and local people who have come to enjoy the summer displays of wildflowers. Unfortunately, other areas of species rich grassland have become neglected and are suffering from scrub encroachment, over grazing and/or amenity mowing.

Current Status

The current extent, distribution and quality of grasslands in Bristol are fairly well understood. The majority of species rich grasslands in the city are designated as Sites of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCI), and – in the case of the Avon Gorge – as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

Calcareous grassland is found on shallow lime-rich soils generally overlying limestone rocks. In Bristol the most significant area of calcareous grassland is found on the Avon Gorge and Clifton and Durdham Downs. The Avon Gorge is particularly known for its large number of nationally rare plants – including both Bristol rock-cress and Bristol onion (round headed leek) – for which the Gorge is the only British mainland site. Other characteristic species present include yellow-wort, common centaury, fairy flax and dropwort.

Neutral grasslands are found on soils that are deeper and less free-draining than the limestone soils and are generally richer in nutrients. Characteristic species include: dyer's greenweed, devil's-bit scabious and pepper saxifrage. Neutral grassland is found across Bristol, with some of the best examples found in the south of the city. Sites include: Stockwood Open Space, Hawkfield Meadows, Manor Woods Valley, Highridge Common, Kingsweston Down, and Narrowways Junction.

Acid grassland occurs on soils overlying acid rocks. It occurs in Bristol over sandstone and is only known at two sites in the city – Troopers Hill and Oldbury Court Estate. Characteristic species present include sheep's sorrel and heath bedstraw.

Lowland heath is vegetation with more than 25% cover of dwarf shrubs including heathers and western gorse. There are patches of lowland heath at Troopers Hill, supporting bell heather and ling.

Current Threats

- Pressure from development
- Neglect leading to rank overgrowth and scrub encroachment
- Inappropriate recreational use
- Inappropriate management eg regular amenity mowing, overgrazing (particularly in pony paddocks)
- Lack of ability to use grazing as a management technique due to difficulties associated with the urban setting
- Lack of awareness of value
- Habitat fragmentation
- Arson on some hay meadows in summer months
- Practical difficulty of managing small areas such as roadside verges for conservation

Objective 1: Monitor condition and extent of species rich grassland resource

Target:

- Aim to measure favourable conservation status of all known species rich grassland sites outside BCC control by 2013
- Map distribution of all priority grassland habitat, its status and management
- Identify all grassland sites with skylark present

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Objective 2: Maintain and enhance the quality and extent of the existing resource

Target:

- No net loss in the extent of the existing habitat resource
- All BCC species rich grasslands to be in favourable conservation status by the year 2015
- No net loss of skylark populations

Objective 3: Restore/create new species rich grassland on appropriate sites

Target:

- Restore/create species rich grassland on appropriate sites (including green roofs) – target 3 hectares by 2013

Objective 4: Increase awareness and enjoyment of areas of species rich grassland

Target:

- Develop Bristol Meadow Project to raise awareness of existing locations through web and other literature and encourage access
- Three 'open day' events held at grassland site every year through the Biodiversity Partnership

SPECIES RICH GRASSLAND HABITAT ACTIONS	OBJECTIVE	DATE	IMPLEMENTORS
Map existing known extent of species rich grassland, status and management as basis for future monitoring	1, 3	2009	BCC, BRERC
Seek to undertake favourable conservation status survey of all non BCC grassland sites	1	2013	AWT, BCC, NE
Identify and map all locations with skylarks present, monitor population	1	2008 – 2013	BOC, BNS, BRERC
Ensure that development does not lead to a net loss of species rich grassland habitat and enhances the extent where possible	2	2008 – 2013	BCC
Introduce appropriate management onto all BCC species rich grasslands to ensure in favourable conservation status by 2015	2	2008 – 2013	BCC, AWT

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Conduct audit of all existing grassland re-creation/restoration schemes. Produce guidelines for new schemes including lists of appropriate species	3	2012	BRERC, BCC, NE
Identify sites for re-creation/restoration of species rich grassland and develop programme for implementation towards target of 3 hectares	3	2009 – ongoing	BCC, AWT
Develop specification for species rich grassland green roofs, and promote through the planning system (see Green Roofs section)	3	2009 – ongoing	BCC
Develop Bristol Meadow Project promotional plan and implement	4	2010	AWT, BCC
Run three meadow open days/guided walks per year	4	2009 – 2013	BAP Partnership
Identify grassland sites with poor access and develop programme to improve access as appropriate	4	2011 – 2013	



Photography: Common spotted orchid, Small scabious: Becky Coffin