

Guidance for the management of flowering grasslands

General objectives

This includes hay meadows, lowland dry acid grassland and other areas of flowering grassland. It is important that advice is sought before undertaking work on species-rich grasslands.

- Manage habitat to maintain and enhance plant species diversity.
- Encourage the spread of seed from species-rich grasslands to those neighbouring areas, which can be managed appropriately.
- Maintain open aspect of larger sites to favour grassland-breeding birds, especially where there are existing concentrations. For acid grasslands in particular, consider how these relate to and can complement the forest habitat network.

Important features to develop

- Species-rich sward.
- Grasses and wildflowers which flower and seed and so provide nectar for insects and food for birds and mammals.
- Soils of low nutrient status, which favours the growth of wildflowers rather than vigorous grasses.
- Wet or damp areas, which provide a habitat for a greater variety of species.
- Large areas of open grassland, without trees, which are favoured by grassland breeding birds and brown hares.
- Links to other habitats as part of a mosaic (but see above on large areas).

Priority species' groups for which habitat is important

Birds	Mammals	Butterflies
Barn Owl (lowlands only)	Brown Hare	Wall Brown
Grey Partridge	Bats (for feeding)	Small Heath
Kestrel		
Lapwing		
Linnet		
Skylark		
Song Thrush*		
Starling		
Swallow		
Tree Sparrow		
Twite (see Species Action Plan)		
Yellow Hammer*		
* when shrub cover and trees are present		

Other species groups for which habitat is important

- Moths, fungi other grassland invertebrates and, where ponds occur nearby, amphibians and dragonflies/damselflies.
- Acid grassland can be important for lower plant communities, especially on poor soils.

Maintaining and improving the habitat

To maintain the diversity of plants within flowering grasslands requires proper management. Those not cropped will develop into rank grassland with fewer plant species (although some animal groups may benefit).

- To reduce or maintain a low nutrient status in the soil it is important the sward is cropped (cut, grazed or both) and fertiliser inputs kept to a minimum or, in some cases, even eliminated.
- Cuts may be less frequent with acid grassland as the dry acid soils and low nutrient status are not favourable conditions for many grasses.
- The sward should be cropped after the seed has set and fallen to the ground. If grassland breeding birds are present this will be after they have finished raising their young.
- Species diversity of grasslands can be increased by introducing wildflowers to the sward. This can be done with plugs (young plants) or by seeding. Before deciding which species to plant or sow it is important to get advice about those most appropriate to the site.
- Creating ponds will add immensely to the value of the habitat (not within the habitat but adjacent to wet areas is especially appropriate). Ponds sited in the open away from trees and shrubs may attract different species to those sheltered by shrubs.

Species to plant

- Generally it is not appropriate to plant trees or shrubs in species rich or acid grassland. On adjacent sites hedgerows or shrubs can be planted to complement grasslands but ensure that planted areas are not used by grassland breeding birds.
- Native grassland wildflower species - those suitable for acidic sites will differ markedly from those suitable for neutral areas. For information on the correct species to plant look for The Natural History Museum's Postcode Plant Database at www.nhm.ac.uk or write to The Natural History Museum, Cromwell Road, London, SW7 5BD, UK.

Extending the habitat

- The value of these areas can be increased by forming links with, and by enhancing other habitats, like scrub, hedgerows and ponds but most especially with other grasslands.
- Nearby or adjacent grasslands of low ecological value can be enhanced by employing the above management techniques and by relying upon the natural colonisation of plants from species rich grasslands.