

HABITAT ACTION PLAN FOR UNIMPROVED NEUTRAL GRASSLAND

LEAD AGENCY: Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust
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CURRENT STATUS

The vast majority of Nottinghamshire's grasslands have been 'improved' by the use of fertilisers and/or reseeded with rye grass. Traditional 'unimproved' grasslands occur in small fields as hay meadows and pastures, and as fragments on road verges, golf courses, churchyards and other non-agricultural land. They are characterised by a colourful mixture of grasses and herbaceous species such as cowslip, ox-eye daisy and meadow vetchling, with rushes, marsh marigold and ragged robin in wetter areas. These grasslands are typical of areas such as the mid-Nottinghamshire Farmlands, with neutral soils. This plan does not cover the extensive floodplain grasslands of the river valleys, which fall under the Lowland Wet Grassland habitat action plan, although there is some overlap in vegetation type.

Between 1930 and 1984 unimproved lowland grassland of all types decreased by an estimated 97% in England and Wales, as a result of agricultural intensification. Losses have continued during the 1980s and 90s, and have been recorded at 2-10% per annum in some counties. The East Midlands has a particularly high rate of loss, and although the current extent is not accurately known, it is estimated that Nottinghamshire's unimproved grassland has declined by 97-99% since 1930. Lowland hay meadow is an internationally rare and threatened habitat, and some types are identified as a priority under European law.

THREATS

The main factors currently affecting the County's unimproved neutral grasslands are:

- Agricultural improvement through drainage, ploughing, re-seeding and fertiliser treatment.

Plan

- The shift from hay making to silage production, with more frequent and often earlier annual cutting, reducing seeding opportunities for plants and hence eventually species richness.
- Lack of management, leading to bracken and scrub encroachment.
- Lack of aftermath grazing following cutting, leading to a loss of species richness.
- Supplementary stock feeding, which introduces more nutrients than are removed, leading to fertilisation.
- Application of herbicides and pesticides.
- Atmospheric nutrient input.
- Loss of species due to heavy grazing pressure.

CURRENT INITIATIVES - EXAMPLES

- A UK Habitat Action Plan for Lowland Hay Meadows has been prepared, which covers the same habitat types as this plan.
- English Nature has compiled a lowland grassland inventory, and the County's most important sites are designated as SSSIs.
- Road verges of value for biodiversity are designated as Notified Road Verges by the County Council.
- Many private landowners manage areas of unimproved neutral grassland, and have a vital part to play in its conservation.
- Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust manages 75ha of unimproved neutral grassland in its Nature Reserves.
- Newark and Sherwood District Council manages 2ha of unimproved neutral grassland within Devon Park Pastures Local Nature Reserve.
- Areas of unimproved neutral grassland designated as SINCs are given a degree of protection under the planning system.
- Advice on grassland management is available from a variety of sources.

TARGETS

The following targets were agreed by the HAP target review group.

Nottinghamshire Local Biodiversity Action

Plan

This is a locally specific habitat that falls within the UK Broad habitat of Neutral Grassland and has similarities with the UK Priority habitat of Lowland Meadows. UK Broad classification is taken as unimproved grassland occurring on circum-neutral soils. It includes enclosed and managed grassland such as hay meadows and pastures.

UK Priority Habitat, Lowland Meadows are taken to include most forms of unimproved neutral grassland across the enclosed lowland landscapes of the UK, and not restricted to grasslands cut for hay, but also takes into account unimproved neutral pastures where livestock grazing is the main land use. In non-agricultural settings additional examples may be found in recreational sites, church-yards, roadside verges and a variety of other localities. These grasslands are typical of areas such as the mid-Nottinghamshire Farmlands, with neutral soils. This plan does not cover the extensive flood plain grasslands of the river valleys, which fall under the Lowland Wet Grassland.

Target Type	Target Text	Units	2005 Baseline	2010 Target	2015 Target
Maintain Extent	Maintain the extent of all existing unimproved neutral grassland.	Ha	688	688	1488
Achieve Condition	Maintain and improve by management existing unimproved neutral grassland.	Ha	193 (28% of existing habitat in favourable condition)	482 (70% of total habitat resource)	688 (100% of 2005 baseline resource)
Restoration	Improve the condition of relict habitat so that it qualifies as unimproved neutral grassland.	Ha		800	1264
Expansion	Encourage the re-establishment and increase the area of unimproved neutral grassland.	Ha			

Baseline data was based on a survey of grassland sites of SINC status by the Notts Biological and Geological Record Centre (NBGRC), a survey of SSSI data by English Nature, and an estimate of unaccounted for sites. There is potential that some of the neutral grassland resource will be found on farmland and therefore the greatest potential to increase the resource through the ELS and HLS agri-environment schemes. The breakdown of baseline data is as follows:

Nottinghamshire Local Biodiversity Action

Plan

(in ha)	Favourable Condition	Unfavourable Condition	Resource Total
SSSI Sites	58	0	58
Non SSSI Sites and SFT sites	123	393	515
Unaccounted for sites	12	102	115
Total	193 (28%)	495 (72%)	688

The restoration/expansion target (again combined for this habitat type) were agreed upon to be fairly optimistic, due to the potential to increase this habitat type through the agri-environment schemes.

PROPOSED ACTION

Policy and legislation

1. Ensure the incorporation of relevant (inter-)national law, policies and guidance into all plans and policies relating to the protection, enhancement and management of unimproved neutral grassland habitat.

ACTION: Government Agencies, Local Authorities, NGO's.

2. Through planning control or other land use consultation processes, allow no further loss of areas of unimproved neutral grassland habitat and seek opportunities to enhance existing areas and create new areas through approved development.

ACTION: Government Agencies, Local Authorities, NGO's.

3. Ensure agri-environment, forestry and other funding schemes include appropriate management options and design measures to suit local nature conservation needs.

ACTION: Government Agencies.

Site safeguard and management

4. Review the extent of SSSI coverage of grassland habitat and consider notifying further sites as necessary.

ACTION: Government Agencies.

5. Designate SINCs and declare Local Nature Reserves on appropriate areas of habitat or instigate other appropriate measures for their protection.

ACTION: Government Agencies, Local Authorities, NGO's.

Plan

6. Promote the uptake of positive management with owners of SSSIs, LNRs, SINCs and any other areas of unimproved neutral grassland habitat.

ACTION: Government Agencies, Local Authorities, NGO's.

7. Carry out appropriate habitat management on sites controlled by BAP partners.

ACTION: Government Agencies, Local Authorities, NGO's.

8. Ensure sites containing unimproved neutral grassland habitat have appropriate management plans that are working towards improving site management and condition

ACTION: Government Agencies, Local Authorities, NGO's.

9. Acquire land to ensure good habitat management or to create habitat.

ACTION: NGO's.

Advisory

10. Provide formal or informal training in management techniques for unimproved neutral grassland habitat to land managers, site wardens, volunteers, etc.

ACTION: Government Agencies, Local Authorities, NGO's.

11. Establish demonstration sites or projects to demonstrate/publicise good habitat management techniques.

ACTION: Government Agencies, Local Authorities, NGO's.

Future research and monitoring

12. Establish and maintain a monitoring programme (a site register) to determine progress towards county HAP targets.

ACTION: Government Agencies, Local Authorities, NGO's.

13. Ensure that areas of unimproved neutral grassland habitat are periodically resurveyed to establish extent and condition. Update resulting habitat inventory every 5 years and revise targets and HAPs if necessary.

ACTION: Government Agencies, Local Authorities, NGO's.

Communications and publicity

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14. Improve public awareness and appreciation of unimproved neutral grassland habitat by providing appropriate interpretation, education and access (where appropriate).

ACTION: Government Agencies, Local Authorities, NGO's.

15. Improve awareness of the value of, and appropriate management techniques for unimproved neutral grassland habitat among site owners and occupiers.

ACTION: Government Agencies, Local Authorities, NGO's.

What you can do

- Create a wildflower 'meadow' in your garden by planting with wildflowers and grasses, and then cutting only after flowering has finished. Advice is available from Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust.
- Encourage those responsible for managing your local churchyard or park to set aside an area to be managed for wildflowers. Encourage your Parish Council to be sympathetic to the management needs of Notified Road Verges.

Species List

The following are examples of species of conservation concern (Appendix A) which are likely to benefit from this action plan:

- Brown hare
- Harvest mouse
- Stoat
- Barn owl
- Common buzzard
- Corn bunting
- Skylark
- Yellow wagtail
- Barred rivulet moth
- Green hairstreak butterfly
- Green winged orchid
- Lesser stitchwort
- Lesser trefoil
- Narrow-leaved meadow grass
- Narrow-leaved pepperwort
- Smith's cress
- Smooth brome
- Meadow cranesbill

