



# Species-rich Grassland Biodiversity Action Plan

A Wildthings Habitat Action Plan  
2006–2010

## Introduction

'Species-rich grassland' is a broad term used for grassland habitats of high nature conservation interest, which have not been subject to agricultural improvement or intensive management. The term encompasses three UK priority habitat types which occur in Bath and North East Somerset – lowland meadows, commonly called neutral grasslands; lowland calcareous grasslands, commonly called calcareous grasslands, and lowland dry acid grassland, commonly called acid grasslands.

Within the Bath and North East Somerset area these grasslands generally occur on well-drained soil, and form characteristic grassland habitats. Where they encompass flushes and high water tables, a range of community types can develop, often within a small physical area. Traditional management is by extensive grazing (pasture) or by a combination of hay cutting and aftermath grazing (meadows), receiving little or no inputs of artificial fertilizers or herbicides. Typically these grassland have never been re-seeded, intensively grazed for long periods nor deeply cultivated. Their value lies not necessarily in containing rare species, but in the sheer variety of plants and animals they support, many of which are indeed scarce.

Truly unimproved grassland is extremely rare, with most having been subject to some form of intensification at times. The quality and type of grassland depends on a number of factors, such as management history, aspect, soil-type and depth and degree of fragmentation. On a sliding scale, quality is usually characterised by the number and diversity of flowers, grasses, fungi and invertebrate species found.

National Vegetation Community (NVC) types embraced by this definition are primarily calcareous CG3 (*Bromopsis erectus* grassland) and 'neutral' (mesotrophic) MG5 (*Cynosurus cristatus*-*Centurea nigra* grassland).





## Current Status

The current extent, distribution and quality of grasslands in Bath & North East Somerset are not thoroughly understood. However, the area is very likely to follow the national trend of a declining resource, with historical losses due to post-World War II agricultural intensification and urban development. More recent losses are likely to be through neglect in management as a result of the down-turn in farming economic viability, particularly for small farms and those on marginal land.

The total resource in the South West of England is thought to be around 9000 hectares of unimproved neutral grassland and 25000 hectares for unimproved calcareous grassland. The figure for neutral grassland is considered to be optimistic in the extreme, possibly reflecting inclusion of figures for habitat mosaics and semi-improved species-rich grassland. Calcareous grassland is much more widespread, but with a good proportion of this figure being found on a single location, Salisbury Plain.

There are a handful of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in Bath and North East Somerset that contain species-rich grassland as features, such as Brown's Folly (Avon Wildlife Trust (AWT) Reserve), Cleave's Wood and Folly Farm (AWT Reserve) but none are extensive or are exclusively grassland habitats. There are also a number of Sites of Nature Conservation Importance (SNICIs) that include species-rich grassland.

The Bristol Regional Environmental Records Centre has recently undertaken work to map UK Priority Habitats throughout the former county of Avon area. This indicates that the Bath & North East Somerset area supports only a small extent of priority grassland habitats. The figures reported are :

- 34 Ha of Lowland dry acid grassland
- 81 Ha of Lowland meadow
- 474 Ha of Lowland Calcareous Grassland

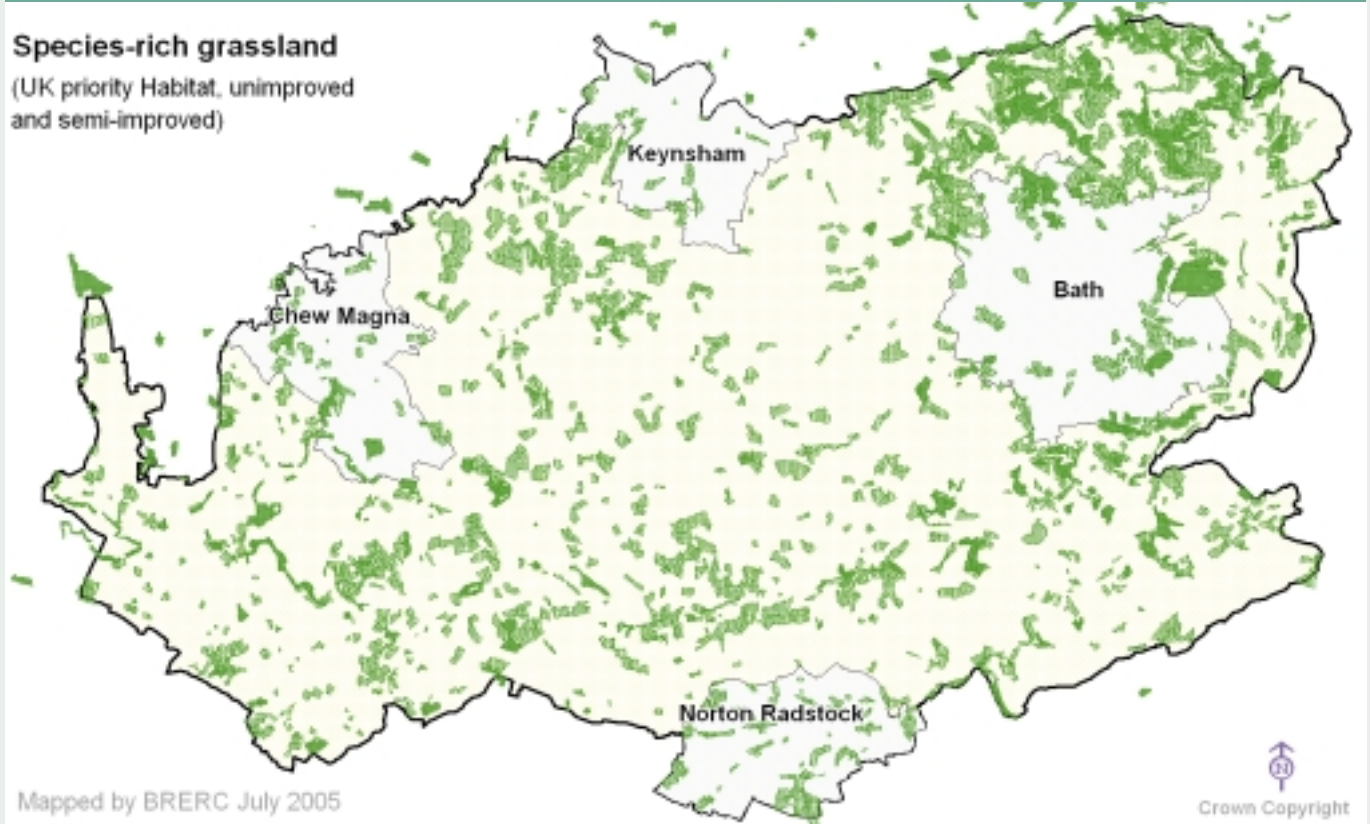
In total this equates to coverage of only 1.7% of the district. Whilst useful to give an approximation of the distribution and limited extent of unimproved grasslands and priority grassland habitats the data needs to be reviewed for accuracy and updated with further survey work.

(NB The Flora of the Bristol Region 2000 provides an excellent source of further details on the species-composition and location of grassland habitats within B&NES and the wider region)

## Current Factors Affecting Species-rich Grassland in B&NES

- Current agri-environment schemes are insufficient to support and attract interest in maintaining extensive grassland management regimes
- Promotion and targeting of agri-environment schemes
- Low market prices for finished beef animals and falling milk prices encourage intensive grassland management
- Post-BSE all beef animals have to be finished before reaching 30 months of age, completely undermining the viability of extensive grazing systems
- A move from hay to silage production, with earlier and more frequent cutting degrades species-rich meadows
- Highly efficient contemporary hay-making - lack of periodic late cutting and lack of seed transported by machinery between result in a reduction of species numbers and diversity
- Over-grazing by livestock, including expansion of horse and pony culture
- Abandonment, neglect and lack of grazing
- New development, such as housing and roads, and aggregate extraction
- Practical difficulties of managing small and often isolated parcels of unimproved grassland in a sympathetic manner
- Incomplete knowledge of occurrence and distribution
- Non-agricultural land use change
- Agricultural diversification
- Highways maintenance – species-rich verges
- Neutral Grassland Survey 1999-2002 project operated by AWT Biodiversity Officer, funded by English Nature (EN) surveying for quality neutral grassland

## Distribution map

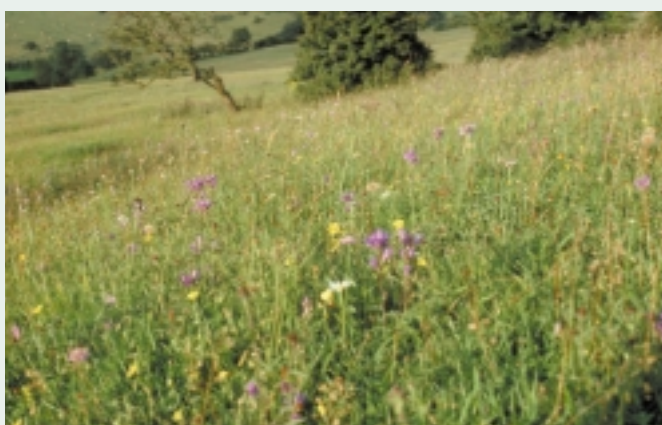


### Current action

- Management & grant advice (including Environmental Stewardship) through work of Batscapes project, AWT and Farming Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG)
- English Nature Management Agreements
- Biodiversity Action Grants
- SSSI & SNCI protection from inappropriate development
- Planning and development of an Avon Grassland Project

### Objectives

- 1 Establish the extent and distribution of species-rich and priority grasslands through survey and 'ground-truthing' Phase 1 data and new surveys
- 2 Sustain and bring into favourable conservation management the existing resource of species-rich grassland
- 3 Provide enhanced, targeted and coordinated management advice and support for grassland landowners (including agri-envirom schemes)
- 4 Raise awareness of the importance of species-rich grasslands
- 5 Identify needs and opportunities for habitat restoration and re-establishment
- 6 Protect key sites through the planning system



## Proposed actions with lead agencies

Action	Lead	Measurable Outputs	Objectives	Target Date
A. Review grassland information	BRERC	Inventory of known grassland sites	1,2,3,5	Oct 2006
B. Survey & map priority habitats, and identify sites for enhancement or restoration	BRERC	Audit of grasslands in B&NES (Map based)	1,2,3,4,5	Oct 2007
C. Provide coordinated & targeted management advice & support	Batscapes AWT, FWAG	No. of farms visited; no. of Stewardship Agreements secure; Ha managed	2,4	Ongoing – enhanced Oct 2005-2006 though Batscapes project
D. Target Biodiversity Grants at grassland management and protection	B&NES	Number of grassland projects funded; Ha improved	2,4	2006-2010
E. Influence DEFRA over agri-environment schemes and other support mechanisms	B&NES FWAG	Better schemes; increased uptake	2,3,4	Ongoing
F. Produce leaflet about biodiversity value of grasslands and giving management advice	B&NES FWAG	Leaflet	2,4	2008
G. Produce publication of priority species associated with grasslands	B&NES BRERC	Published information	2,3,4	2007
H. Monitor & review implementation of site protection through SSSI & SNCI mechanisms	English Nature B&NES	Statistics of loss & gains	2	2007 onwards
I. Review data base & identify key sites for restoration / re-establishment	BRERC B&NES	Strategic review of grassland resource and opportunities to contribute to UK biodiversity targets	5	2006
J. Work with Avon Biodiversity Action Plan and partners to achieve favourable conservation status of key sites	AWT B&NES EN	Favourable conservation status for key sites	2	On-going
K. Influence regional spatial strategy to achieve key site protection, enhancement & restoration	B&NES EN	Strategic habitat protection and enhancement	4,6	On-going
L. Ensure adequate policies for habitat protection within the local development framework	B&NES	Policy in Local Development Framework	6	Review 2008
M. Ensure implementation and monitoring of planning policies	B&NES	Habitat protection	6	2006 onwards

**AWT** – Avon Wildlife Trust

**B&NES** – Bath and North East Somerset Council

**BRERC** – Bristol Regional Environmental Records Centre

**FWAG** – Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group

**Wildthings** – B&NES Local Biodiversity Action Plan Partnership