

Protecting Worcestershire's grasslands through the local sites system



Worcestershire



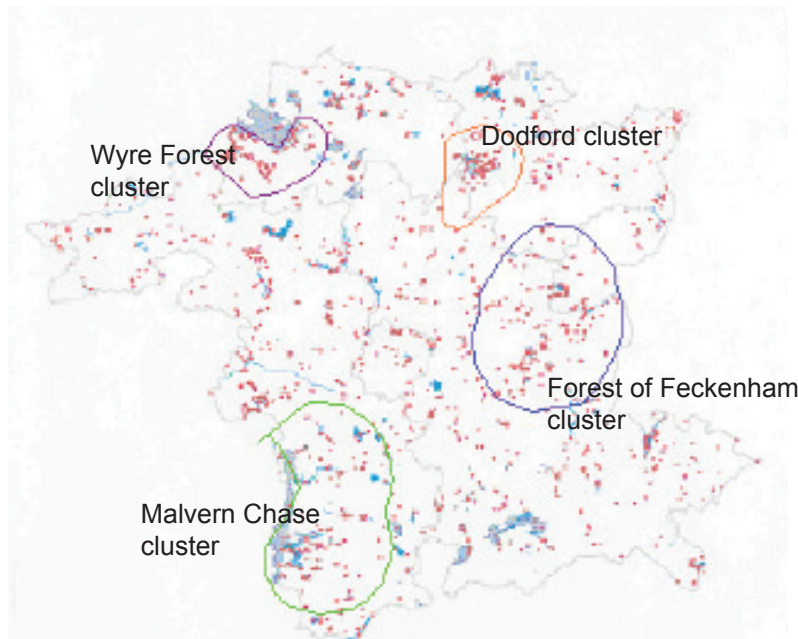
Spring Scene: A Species-rich Neutral Grassland Hay Meadow with green-winged orchids, buttercups and cowslips – a Local Wildlife Site at Bradley Green, near Feckenham

Why Worcestershire's old meadows are so valuable – our national natural heritage

The above-pictured wildflower meadow is just one of over 200 Worcestershire grasslands of county importance identified as Local Wildlife Sites (LWS). With a total county area of this type of grassland of some 1500 Hectares, Worcestershire is thought to hold over 20% of England's resource of surviving neutral hay-meadow grasslands.

This makes our contribution to national grassland biodiversity extremely significant, and the protection of the county's remaining flower-rich meadows - which are still being threatened by overgrazing, agricultural improvement, or just simple neglect - of the highest priority.

Where are the Worcestershire Neutral Grasslands found?



Concentrations of unimproved neutral meadows across Worcestershire

The resource of flower-rich meadows in the county is on the clay vales of Feckenham Forest around Dodford, Malvern Chase and on the edges of Wyre Forest. These are four high priority biodiversity areas where many Local Wildlife Site-listed grasslands are concentrated and where Worcestershire Wildlife Trust has been focusing nature conservation efforts through the County Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) (habitat and vision mapping processes), the recent

review of Local Wildlife Sites completed in 2009 and Living Landscapes initiatives. Also of equal importance, though they are not classic neutral hay meadows and are smaller in number and total area, are the acidic grasslands on sandstones in the northeast (Kidderminster/Birmingham plateau), the calcareous or limestone grasslands of Bredon and the Cotswold edge and the floodplain grasslands of the Severn and Avon Vales and southwest Worcestershire.

What are Local Wildlife Sites?

Found mostly on privately owned land, Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) are considered to be of at least county-level importance for their flora and fauna, or in some cases for specific scarce or threatened species.

Currently there are 530 LWS in existence - scattered across the county. They can be thought of as 'the non-statutory equivalents' of the SSSIs (Sites of Special Scientific Interest), though in many cases, they support near-nationally important flora/fauna.

Though having no formal legal protection, they are recognised by the local authorities for development control purposes and appear on Local Development Framework Plans (which have replaced district council local plans). Apart from the DEFRA Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Regulations, 2006, which

apply to intensification, such as ploughing, on some types of 'uncultivated land', normal agricultural practices such as grazing and haymaking are unaffected.

In nature conservation terms and in the context of the wider Worcestershire landscape, traditional grasslands – and particularly the wildlife site meadows and pastures – form an integral part of the inter-linking patchwork of arable, pasture, hedgerow, stream, small woodland, scrubby corner. They function rather as the "miner's canary" or litmus paper for the health of the managed environment. Maintaining such core areas means that the countryside can be more resilient to agricultural and development pressures and that specialist species will be better buffered against other factors, such as climatic change.

How Worcestershire Wildlife Trust is using the LWS system and other conservation measures to protect and manage flower-rich meadows in the wider countryside

The Worcestershire Wildlife Trust has in recent years been engaged in a county-wide review of all Local Wildlife Sites. During this auditing process, we have assessed their condition – i.e. whether or not they meet defined sets of scientific criteria, in some cases identified new sites, talked to owners about past/present/future management, offered guidance and facilitated grant aid – where appropriate and if requested.

With and through the co-operation of landowners the Wildlife Trust and the Worcestershire Local Sites Partnership have helped conserve grasslands in the following ways:-

- Initiating contact and dialogue with farmers and horse keepers who own old grasslands and meadows.
- Raising awareness of the importance

of grasslands in Worcestershire, especially among landowners/managers who have grassland Wildlife Sites on their land.

- Offering free management advice to LWS owners.
- Putting the owners in touch with grant-giving bodies such as Natural England (the Environmental Stewardship Higher Level Schemes).
- Acquiring some of the very best examples (especially within priority landscape areas) as nature reserves – if land becomes available for sale.
- Encouraging meadow awareness – such as in the Forest of Feckenham through the Worcestershire Biodiversity Partnership.

Current initiatives & future projects

Malvern Hills AONB Orchards Project – Traditional orchards and grasslands: A pilot project in the North Malvern Hills was undertaken in 2010 to identify traditional fruit orchards and to trial a new system of Local Site selection criteria for this habitat. Old orchards often co-incide with a species-rich grass sward in the understorey. The survey has resulted in a number of new Local Wildlife Sites and we may be extending this work to further orchard-with-grassland sites in the county.

Bow Brook Corridor/Forest of Feckenham/Malvern Chase – ongoing survey and site selection: We are continuing to search for new candidate meadows and pastures in these priority landscape areas and will be approaching landowners, as well as monitoring existing sites.

Grasslands Management Manual – A landowner's guide to recognition, management & restoration: This is available from our website as a downloadable pdf. Its contents

include sections on history, current status, types, distribution of herb-rich grasslands; best practice for management and restoration and creation; where to visit guide for best sites e.g. nature reserves; sources of advice and links to other useful websites.

Targeted Environmental Stewardship (ES) in Priority Landscape Areas - Natural England are currently prioritising applications from farmers and land managers within defined areas such as Forest of Feckenham and Severn-Avon Vales. Anyone interested in applying for the ES Entry Level/Higher Level scheme agreements and capital works plans for restoration, management and creation of species-rich grasslands and traditional orchards is advised to contact Natural England's West Midlands Region Worcester Office on 0300 060 2923.

Protection, enhancement and creation of grasslands through the planning process -

The Trust works closely with Local Planning Authorities and developers to ensure that important grasslands are protected from the adverse impacts of new development. For the most part this means directing development away from valuable sites, integrating good grasslands into the Green Infrastructure associated with larger applications and

delivering new grasslands through creative landscaping schemes.

A great example of a scheme that has delivered grassland improvements is the new nature reserve at Welcome Break's Hopwood Motorway Services. A total of 24ha of new semi-natural habitat was created as part of the planning application for the services and part of this is now open to the public.

If you live in Worcestershire, and know of, own or manage land with old flower-rich meadows or other interesting wildlife habitats, we are happy to advise on appropriate management. If you think it might be a suitable candidate for recognition as a Local Wildlife Site please contact Michael Liley, Local Wildlife Sites Officer, on 01905 754919 or michael@worcestershirowildlifetrust.org.

Our nature reserves form part of our vision for a Living Landscape for Worcestershire. By working with other landowners, managers and communities we aim to restore, recreate and reconnect fragmented natural habitats to achieve a landscape where wildlife can flourish and people can lead happier and healthier lives.



Ways to get involved:

- Become a member
- Volunteer
- Make a donation
- Leave a gift in your will
- Adopt a species

Worcestershire Wildlife Trust
 Lower Smite Farm, Smite Hill, Hindlip, Worcestershire, WR3 8SZ
 Tel: 01905 754919 Email: enquiries@worcestershirowildlifetrust.org
 Charity No 256618