

Local Wildlife Sites – South East Wales Project

The following information outlines the best practice guidelines for managing the habitat type listed below in a manner that is sympathetic to wildlife. It is part of a series relating to various habitat types and management issues that have been produced by your local Wildlife Trusts.

No.3 Acid Grassland

What is Acid Grassland?

Acid Grassland occurs in both the uplands and lowlands and is strongly associated with poor, free-draining acidic soils. In South Wales, it is found mainly on upper valley slopes and areas of colliery spoil. The vegetation is typically short due to the low productivity and in many localities grazing. Acid grassland is frequently present within a wider mosaic of habitats, either with heath or Bracken and scattered scrub, which is known as Fridd in Wales.



Heath Bedstraw



Ant-hills



Tormentil

What wildlife does it support?

Acid grassland has a characteristic flora with typical plants including Heath Bedstraw, Sheep's Sorrel and Tormentil. Dwarf shrubs such as heathers may also be present at low densities. Ant-hills can be a distinctive feature of the grassland and are frequently a sign of good ecological quality habitat. Acid grassland can support many fantastic scarce/declining species such as Great Crested Newt, Green Woodpecker, Skylark, Meadow Wax-cap, Adder and Lapwing amongst others.



Lapwing



Adder



Green Woodpecker

Why preserve/enhance it?

Acid Grassland, particularly the more unimproved/species-rich examples, which you can justifiably feel proud to have on your land, are a great resource for wildlife. Sadly, they are also a historically much declined habitat. This decline is still ongoing due to both habitat loss and degradation. It is therefore of great importance that this decline is halted and we would very much like to assist you in achieving this goal by both highlighting the threats to this habitat and providing management recommendations.

Threats

The following can all lead to the loss/degradation of this habitat:

- Development i.e. building of roads, housing etc.
- Agricultural improvement - drainage, ploughing, reseeding, fertiliser or herbicide treatment, liming, slurry application, conversion to arable, change from haymaking to silage production.
- Lack of grazing - Invasion by coarse grasses and scrub.
- Inappropriate grazing regimes - Typically excessive grazing levels at the wrong time of year.
- Abandonment and neglect - Encroachment by bracken.
- Forestry planting.

Management Recommendations

The following is recommended to ensure the valuable acid grassland habitat is managed sympathetically for wildlife and is thus preserved/enhanced:

Preservation/Enhancement of Acid Grassland

• Grazing

- ❖ Grazing (or cutting) is important to maintain the correct balance for wildlife in grasslands.
- ❖ Too little grazing and the grassland will become rank and possibly scrub over to the detriment of the wildflowers and associated species.
- ❖ Too much grazing, which is often the case with acid grassland, results in the degradation of the grassland as the wildflowers are not given the opportunity to flourish.
- ❖ Every site is different but as a guide light grazing of between 0.4 and 0.75 Live stock units (LSU)* /ha /per annum) is ideal and should produce a short sward height of up to 5cm in which wildflowers will be prevalent.

*Live Stock Units (LSU)

1 Dairy Cow = 1.0LSU

1 Beef Animal (less than 24 months) = 0.6LSU

1 Suckler Cow = 1.0LSU

1 Breeding Ewe (with or without lamb) = 0.15LSU

1 Horse = 1.0LSU

• Cutting

- ❖ Cutting, perhaps for hay, can be an alternative form of land-use/management.
- ❖ Hay should ideally be cut in late July to allow the wildflowers to seed.
- ❖ If also grazing, follow the cut by aftermath grazing off and on through to the end of February.
- ❖ If grazing is not to follow, then a second cut in September may be required to prevent a build-up of thatch. The meadow is then left untouched until July when it is cut again.
- ❖ It is important to remove the cuttings to prevent nutrient build-up and rank vegetation forming.

There may be further issues that are reducing/threatening the ecological value of your acid grassland such as:

- **Bracken** - For best results, roll/flail/cut bracken twice a year in May/June and again in July/August. Leave bracken on steep slopes or gullies. Consideration however, needs to be given to potential for breeding birds that may limit/preclude work in May/June, if this is the case then control bracken by cutting or spraying after the bird-breeding season in late July/early August. A noticeable reduction will be achieved in 5 years. **Refer to separate Toolkit – No. 12 Bracken Control for more detail.**
- **Invading Scrub** - Remove any invading scrub (particularly birch and gorse) between October to March (avoiding the bird-breeding season also) by either hand pulling or cutting, otherwise this will out shade and out compete traditional meadow species. Stumps should be spot treated with a suitable herbicide to prevent regrowth. **Refer to separate Toolkit – No. 11 Scrub Clearance for more detail.**
- **Invasive weeds**- Control the spread of highly invasive weeds such as ragwort, thistles, Nettles and docks, as well as alien species such as Himalayan Balsam, and Japanese Knotweed. These can be controlled with minimum harm to wildlife.
 - ❖ **Ragwort** can be hand pulled (wear suitable gloves) in May before it sets seed.
 - ❖ **Thistles, nettles, and docks** can be controlled by mowing them to a height of about 15cms before they flower and set seed.
 - ❖ **Himalayan Balsam** can also be controlled by hand-pulling before it sets seed.
 - ❖ **Japanese Knotweed** will require spot treatment with a suitable herbicide.

Refer to separate Toolkits – No. 13 & 14 Invasive Weed Control for more detail.

Restoration of Acid Grassland

There may also be areas of grassland within your land that are not currently of particularly high ecological value but measures can be taken to restore these if desired.

This can be achieved by converting improved grassland (species poor, probably formerly intensively farmed with applications of chemicals) to more species rich semi-improved grassland, by taking an annual hay cut and stock at 1.0LSU/ha/pa, or take an annual hay crop in each of the first three years and stock at 0.75LSU/ha/pa. The grassland would be managed without using any lime, organic, or inorganic fertilisers.

Creation of Acid Grassland

Additionally, there may be some areas within your land that do not have any discernible wildlife value but measures can be taken to create habitat of higher ecological value if desired. The detail of this work is beyond the scope of this document but your Local Wildlife Trust would be delighted to advise you further.

Should you require any further advice regarding the management of your Local Wildlife Site please do not hesitate to contact your local Wildlife Trust:

Gwent Wildlife Trust

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Wildlife Trust of South & West Wales

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Other toolkits available are:

No.1 Neutral Grassland (Hay Meadow)
No.2 Neutral Grassland (Pasture)
No.4 Calcareous Grassland
No.5 Marshy Grassland
No.6 Marsh Grassland (with Marsh Fritillary)
No.7 Heath
No.8 Hedgerows

No.9 Salt Marsh & Coastal Grazing Marsh
No.10 Ponds & Lakes
No.11 Scrub control
No.12 Bracken control
No.13 Invasive weed control (natives – thistle, dock etc.)
No.14 Invasive weed control (aliens – Japanese Knotweed, Himalayan Balsam etc.)

Further useful documents include:

- ❖ Advice on managing grasslands for invertebrates: www.buglife.org.uk/sites/default/files/Grassland_web.pdf
- ❖ Advice on managing grasslands that are in environmental schemes: www.eblex.org.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/managementguidelinesforgrasslandinenvironmentalschemes_210710-final-report.pdf
- ❖ Conservation management advice for livestock businesses: http://www.nfonline.com/cfe_foldout_leaflet_grassland_web/
- ❖ Further advice on grazing: <http://www.grazinganimalsproject.org.uk/>

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