HABITAT ACTION PLAN FOR LOWLAND WET GRASSLAND

LEAD AGENCY: Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
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Current Status

Lowland wet grassland may be defined as periodically flooded pasture or meadow, and includes floodplain grassland, washlands and water meadows. Almost all areas are grazed and some are cut for hay or silage. Sites typically possess ditches, and may contain seasonal water-filled hollows and permanent ponds. Lowland wet grassland falls within the UK Biodiversity Action Plan Coastal and Floodplain Grazing Marsh key habitat type.

The exact extent of lowland wet grassland in the UK is not known, although the UK Biodiversity Action Plan estimates some 300,000 ha of grazing marsh (including that in coastal areas) nationwide. It is a habitat that has decreased in extent by more than 40% since 1930, primarily as a result of drainage and agricultural improvements.

In Nottinghamshire, it is not clear what the distribution and extent of wet grassland ever was. However, before the post World War Two land drainage, flood protection and agricultural intensification schemes, the immense floodplain of the River Trent, along with those of its key tributaries are likely to have included significant areas of wet grassland.

Wet grassland is now a very scarce resource in Nottinghamshire, and in 1993 English Nature (EN) estimated that only 2701ha existed within the County (this is likely to be an over-estimate). The key locations are currently in the Idle Valley, the Erewash floodplain and Smithy Marsh in the Trent Valley. Other smaller areas of wet grassland exist beside lakes, ponds and other waterbodies, particularly in the floodplains.

Threats

The main factors currently affecting Nottinghamshire's lowland wet grasslands are:

- Lack of knowledge about extent and quality of resource.
- Small size and fragmented nature of the overall resource and individual sites.

- Agricultural intensification, including land drainage, and switches from extensive grassland management to silage or arable regimes.

- Insufficient water supply and inappropriate hydrological regimes for wet grassland sites, generally as a result of insensitive flood protection schemes, land drainage, and water abstraction.

- Poor water quality at some sites due to pollution of water courses from industry, domestic sewage and agricultural run-off (although water quality is generally improving).

- Lack of appreciation of the wildlife and wider benefits (eg flood water storage, aquifer re-charge) of wet grassland habitats.

- Lack of funds for the rehabilitation of wet grassland and for longer-term management.

Current Initiatives - Examples

- A UK Habitat Action Plan for Coastal and Floodplain Grazing Marsh has been prepared, which covers this habitat type.

- Many private landowners manage areas of lowland wet grassland, and have a vital part to play in its conservation.

- The Environment Agency (EA) are incorporating wet grassland protection, management and rehabilitation into Local Environment Agency Plans (LEAPs).

- The Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food (MAFF) have included wet grassland as one of the wetland habitats/features to be targeted through Countryside Stewardship in the County.

- A partnership of organisations have just launched The Wet Grassland Guide.This is to be promoted to a variety of audiences in the County, including key decision makers and land use advisers.

- Plans are under discussion to prepare a `strategy' for the Trent Valley floodplain, with wet grassland as a target habitat for management and rehabilitation.

- Notts Wildlife Trust, the RSPB, EN and EA are involved in nature reserve management and rehabilitation projects for wet grassland in the Trent, Idle and Erewash Valleys.

Targets

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

Lowland wet grassland is a locally specific Habitat, and can fall within the UK Broad Habitat types of Improved Grassland and/or Neutral Grassland. The equivalent UK Priority Habitat is that of Lowland wet grassland and grazing marsh. This is defined as periodically flooded pasture, or meadow, and includes floodplain grassland, washlands and water meadows, and may contain ditches which maintain the water levels. Sites may contain seasonal water-filled hollows and permanent ponds with emergent swamp communities, but not extensive areas of tall fen species like reeds; although they may abut with fen and reed swamp communities. Key locations are in the Idle Valley, the Erewash floodplain and Smithy Marsh in the Trent Valley.

Target Type	Target Text	Units	2005 Baseline	2010 Target	2015 Target
Maintain Extent	Maintain the extent of all existing lowland wet grassland.	Ha	350	350	561
Achieve Condition	Maintain and improve by management existing lowland wet grassland.	Ha	42 (12%, existing habitat in favourable condition)	245 (70% of total habitat resource)	350 (100% of 2005 baseline resource)
Restoration	Improve the condition of relict habitat so that it qualifies as lowland wet grassland.	Ha		211	1910
Expansion	Encourage the re-establishment and increase the area of lowland wet grassland.	Ha			

Baseline data was based on a survey of grassland sites of SINC status by the Notts Biological and Geological Record Centre (NBGRC), 70ha of restored wet grassland at Thoresby and Clumber by the Sherwood Forest Trust (SFT), and an estimate of unaccounted for sites. The breakdown of baseline date is as follows:

(in ha)	Favourable Condition	Unfavourable Condition	Resource Total
Non SSSI Sites and SFT sites	41	299	340
Unaccounted for sites	1	9	10
Total	42 (12%)	308 (88%)	350

Expansion and Restoration targets were combined and based on an assumption of planned restoration projects and objective targets. The group agreed that they should accept no loss of resource.

Planned projects counted included:

- 1ha, by 2005, at Hoveringham (Tarmac)
- 10ha, at Lound (NWT)
- 1ha, at Attenborough (NWT)
- 34ha, at Slaynes Lane (Tarmac)
- 2ha, at Cromwell
- 115ha, by 2008, at Beckingham Marshes (RSPB/EA)
- 23ha, at Langford Lowfields (RSPB/EA)
- 15ha, by 2010, at Tiln North (Tarmac)
- 10ha, by 2010, at Sturton Le Steeple (la Farge)
- 15ha, by 2015, at Newington
- 20ha, by 2015, at Sturton Le Steeple (la Farge)
- 35ha, by 2015, at Lound
- 40ha, by 2015, Erewash Valley
- 1800, by 2015, at the Holmes area (including Besthorpe, Muskham and Dunham Bridge)
- 800ha, by 2020, at Beckingham Marshes (RSPB/EA)
- 220, by 2020, at the Holmes area (including Besthorpe, Muskham and Dunham Bridge)

2015 'maintain extent' target is a cumulative figure based on achieving 2010 restoration/expansion targets. The 2020 expansion target has not been included in the targets table, but planned expansion projects equate to a further 1020ha to be restored.

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 lowland wet 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 lowland wet 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.

6. Promote the uptake of positive management with owners of SSSIs, LNRs, SINCs and any other areas of lowland wet 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 lowland wet 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 lowland wet 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 lowland wet 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

14. Improve public awareness and appreciation of lowland wet 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 lowland wet grassland habitat among site owners and occupiers.

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

What you can do

- Help your local branch of RSPB or the Nottinghamshire Bird Watchers to monitor birds on wet grassland sites.

Species List

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

- Otter
- Water vole
- Grass snake
- Snipe
- Lapwing
- Curlew
- Redshank
- Wigeon
- Teal
- Bewick's swan
- Spined loach
- Early marsh orchid
- Parsley water dropwort