



Bedfordshire  
Cambridgeshire  
Northamptonshire  
Peterborough

Lowland Calcareous  
**Grassland**  
and their management

Protecting wildlife  
close to home

# What are lowland calcareous grasslands?

Lowland calcareous grasslands are found on the more lime-rich soils, usually limestone or chalk in the warmer, drier areas of England. They are typically managed as components of pastoral or mixed farming system, supporting sheep, cattle or sometimes horses; a few examples are cut for hay.

These soils are generally well draining and are often shallow and infertile encouraging an intricate mixture of plants and animals. A careful search may reveal as many as 40 plant species in a square metre. Characteristic grasses include sheep's-fescue, upright brome, meadow oat-grass and crested hair grass. The typical herbs of lowland calcareous grassland produce a glorious spectrum of colours from the spring to the early autumn. Invertebrate communities can be equally spectacular, with the blue butterflies being particularly abundant. Chalk grassland as a component of mixed farming is important for a number of rare and declining farmland bird species such as stone-curlew, quail, corn bunting, whinchat, grasshopper warbler and skylark.



Chalkhill Blue



Pasqueflower

## Why are they important?

Only scattered remnants of this once extensive grassland remain, making it one of the United Kingdom's rarest and most threatened habitats. The rich variety of plants and animals which make up lowland calcareous grassland includes many rare and scarce plants, birds and invertebrates such as orchids, pasqueflower and the small blue butterfly, thus giving lowland calcareous grassland considerable nature conservation value.

## What factors affect lowland calcareous grasslands?

Lowland calcareous grassland developed under traditional farming practices, providing pasture for grazing animals, particularly sheep and cattle. Whilst intensification of farming by conversion to arable, application of fertilisers and herbicides, ploughing and re-seeding has accounted for substantial losses of grassland, abandonment of grazing with farm livestock has also played a part in this decline. A lack of grazing allows coarse grasses to dominate, swamping low-growing grasses and herbs, and grass eventually disappears under scrub and trees. Over-grazing is a less widespread problem, yet long periods of grazing such as all summer over several years will have disastrous effects on plants and animals. Problems are also associated with supplementary feeding, which can cause localised sward damage, due to trampling and long term nutrient enrichment.



Hebridean sheep

## Best management practices for lowland meadows

- Grazing is vital for conserving the unique flora and fauna of calcareous grassland. The best kind of management for grasslands is extensive grazing.
- Maintain low stocking rates – this will control invasive plants whilst maintaining the invertebrate fauna that depend on the grasses.
- Aim for a mosaic of longer and shorter grass that will benefit different forms of wildlife.
- The timing of grazing is crucial for flowering plants. It is safest to graze from mid-October through to March.
- Where grazing is not an option, mowing the grassland is the best possible alternative, especially on damper sites and should follow similar guidelines to the cutting of neutral hay meadows. As grass growth may be slow, cutting may not be required every year.
- Cut in late summer, followed by a period of aftermath grazing or cutting to control competitive coarse grasses and encourage the germination of seedlings in the bare patches created by trampling.
- Scrub should be prevented from invading areas of open pasture, but some scattered scrub should be allowed as it supports its own invertebrate fauna; older examples in particular can be important for their dead wood habitat.

## GrazeBeds

### **GrazeBeds website links landowners and graziers**

This website acts as a match making service to link available stock to land in Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire.

If you would like to view or register your land or animals on the website for FREE then visit

[www.grazebeds.org.uk](http://www.grazebeds.org.uk) or contact Laura Downton at the Wildlife Trust.

## Local Seed Initiative

The Wildlife Trust Local Seed Initiative is a partnership with Emorsgate Wild Seeds, local farmers, landowners and agricultural contractors working to restore species-rich grassland. The project relies upon using seed from existing species-rich meadows to diversify meadows that need restoration. If you think your site may be suitable as a donor site or have grassland in need of restoration please contact Christa Perry at the Wildlife Trust.

## County Wildlife Sites

County Wildlife Sites (CWS) are areas of land important for their wildlife. Found on public and private land they play a vital role in the conservation of the UK's natural heritage.



**Lowland calcareous grassland CWS**

## Contact Details

For further information about lowland grassland management and County Wildlife Sites contact your nearest Wildlife Sites Officer.

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