



Wet Grassland Habitat Action Plan

1. Introduction

Wet grassland is included within the UKBAP priority habitat Coastal Floodplain and Grazing Marsh. It supports many important species some of which are rare and/or declining. It has suffered an estimated 40% loss in area within the UK between the 1930s and the 1980s. This level of loss is very likely to have been repeated in Worcestershire.

2. Current status

2.1 Description of habitat

UK wet grasslands provide valuable habitat for a range of native plants, birds and animals. They develop on land which is periodically flooded or waterlogged by freshwater and where land management practices (cutting for hay, grazing) promote swards dominated by short grasses, rushes and sedges. They are not dominated by reeds. The term wet grassland is used to refer to several wetland types. Semi-natural floodplain grassland occurs where floodplains are subject to semi-natural hydrological regimes (e.g. where flood embankments have been constructed). Naturally functioning floodplains are rare in the UK and do not occur in the county in any meaningful quantity. Washlands are embanked areas created for flood storage (e.g. the Ouse Washes) but do not occur in Worcestershire. Water meadows were created to be deliberately flooded and thus to raise hay yields or provide early grass growth for cattle. Water management was undertaken using a complex system of sluices and drains. Today, few remain in working condition with some examples still present in the county. Lastly, there are many examples of wet grassland coinciding with ponds, lakesides and drainage channels as part of the natural hydrosere. Within the county there are many examples of small but nevertheless important wet grasslands in this category. All however have suffered a loss in extent and ecological resilience through drainage and intensive land management practices.

2.2 Distribution and extent

Wet grassland is now mainly confined to the floodplains of England but much of what remains has been agriculturally improved and is of reduced value to wildlife. Some estimates of the historical resource indicate there were at least 1.2 million ha but now less than 0.2million ha remains. In Worcestershire most of the resource is to be found in the floodplains of the Severn and Avon Vales with important semi-natural wet grasslands in the Stour valley notably the marshes of Wilden, Puxton and Stourvale. These sites also contain other habitats including limited areas of fen and marsh. The loss of such large areas of wet grassland has had an adverse impact on breeding waders such that today, in the Worcestershire Severn and Avon vales, *Gallinago gallinago* snipe no longer breed and populations of *Tringa tetanus* redshank, *Vanellus vanellus* lapwing and *Numenius arpuata* curlew are much reduced.

2.3 Legislation

Legislation most pertinent to the conservation, restoration and creation of wet grasslands in the county is:

- **Water Framework Directive (2000)** – requires improvements to the ecological quality of water bodies, flood and drought attenuation and restoration of groundwater.
- **Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (2006)** – requires public bodies to have regard to the purpose of conserving biodiversity in exercising their functions.
- **Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981)** as amended by the **Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000)**
- **EC Council Directive on the Conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Flora and Fauna 1992 ('The Habitats Directive')** – this introduces protection for a suite of sites for birds (Special Protection Areas) and other fauna and flora (Special Areas of Conservation); the so-called Natura 2000 network. There is also protection for a list of species that also require special conservation measures.

2.4 Summary of important sites

Several sites incorporating wet grassland habitats are protected under various designations within the county. Examples are Twyning Meadows SSSI and Stourvale SSSI, Smithmoor Common and the Kempsey Hams complex Special Wildlife Sites, and nature reserves managed by Worcestershire Wildlife Trust such as Hill Court Farm and the Blacklands.

3. Current factors affecting the habitat

- Land drainage has led to wet grassland sites becoming hydrologically isolated and vulnerable.
- River and groundwater abstraction and engineering works for flood alleviation may reduce water availability to floodplain and spring-fed sites.
- Eutrophication of sites through inundation with nutrient-rich (flood) water has led to a reduction in sward diversity and the dominance of vigorous grass species.
- Reduction in ground water levels has resulted in the loss of flora and fauna dependant on high groundwater conditions.
- Ecological isolation due to fragmentation of the resource inhibits movement of species between sites due to less favourable linking corridors.
- Inappropriate management of sites, in particular conversion from hay to silage cutting, over/under grazing and applications of fertilisers.
- Climate change causing fluctuating and inconsistent rainfall patterns resulting in inundation and drought.
- Development pressure – developers lack awareness of the value and sensitivity of potential development sites.
- Weakness in information distribution between relevant bodies and individuals.
- Inconsistency in availability of grant funding that can encourage better long-term management of existing sites and help financially with restoration and creation projects.
- Poor economic incentive for landowners. More advice and real outcomes are required to encourage activities such as local branding.

4. Current Action

4.1 Local protection

SSSI designations are used to protect some of the most valuable sites within the county. Special Wildlife Sites (SWS) are non-statutory but help identify valuable sites for protection through the development control process.

4.2 Habitat management and programmes of action

- Nature Reserves managed by Worcestershire Wildlife Trust.
- SSSI sites managed by Natural England and landowners.
- Severn and Avon Vale Partnership – working with partners to improve habitat management, restoration and creation.
- Natural England Environmental Land Management Schemes; CSS and HLS.
- Worcestershire Wildlife Trust provides advice, consultancy services and occasionally capital resources to owners/managers of sites requiring creation and/or restoration.
- Landscapes for Living initiative – seeks to deliver a 50-year biodiversity vision for the county underpinned by the development of a county-wide ecological network. Restoration of a more natural hydrological regime within rivers and floodplains will be key in implementing this.

4.3 Survey, research and monitoring

- Worcestershire Habitat Inventory – land use and habitat inventory on a field-by-field basis of the whole county.
- SAVWP – water level management study into Longdon Brook to support wetland delivery.
- SAVWP – monitoring of wet grassland sites created or restored by the partnership to identify rates of species re-colonisation after water level management has been undertaken.
- Worcestershire Wildlife Trust Wetlands Survey (1998) - a survey of approximately 80 of the county's most biologically valuable wetlands including wet grassland sites.
- Worcestershire Wildlife Trust Lakes Survey (2002) – includes riparian habitat details.
- Special Wildlife Site review undertaken by the SWS Partnership – identifies the county's most important sub-SSSI sites including wet grasslands.
- Worcestershire Wildlife Trust Hill Court Farm wet grassland reserve – site hydrology is monitored using a matrix of dipwells.

5. Associated Plans

Rivers and Streams, Wet Woodland, Ponds and Lakes, Fen and Marsh, Otter, Water Vole, Black Poplar.

6. Vision Statement

To conserve and enhance the quality and extent of all current wet grassland sites and create and restore additional sites in order to enhance ecological resilience (particularly in floodplains by restoring more natural hydrological regimes) in the light of climate change and other environmental pressures.

7. Targets

Target Type	Target Text	Baseline value	Target Value	Target Timescale
Maintain Extent	Use the County Habitat Inventory to produce an audit of all wet grassland sites in the county	0 ha of county surveyed and analysed	173,529ha	2009
Achieve Condition	Identify opportunities across the county for restoring hydrological regimes in floodplains and then implement projects to achieve conservation objectives.	0 ha of county analysed	173,529ha	2012

8. Actions

Action Code	Action Category	Action Text	Location	Complete Action By	Lead Organisation	Supporting Organisations
WRC LWG CA 01	2.1	Use existing sites to demonstrate and encourage good management practice.	Hill Court Farm, Longdon	2017	WWT	
WRC LWG CA 02	2.1	Use existing sites to demonstrate and encourage good management practice.	Buryend Farm, Upton	2017	NE	SAVWP
WRC LWG CA 03	2.1	Use existing sites to demonstrate and encourage good management practice.	Manor Farm, Eckington	2017	WWT	
WRC LWG CA 04	2.11	Maintain communication links with owners of SSSI's. Ensure up to date guidance is provided for SSSI owners.	Worcestershire	2017	NE	SAVWP
WRC LWG CA 05	2.11	Maintain communication links with owners of Special Wildlife Sites. Ensure up to date guidance is provided for Special Wildlife Site owners.	Worcestershire	2017	WWT	SWS Partnership, SAVWP, FWAG
WRC LWG CA 06	2.11	Collate and distribute existing information on wet grassland habitat management to relevant land managers.	Worcestershire	2010	WWT	SAVWP, FWAG
WRC LWG CA 07	2.15	Develop and deliver training opportunities in partnership with agricultural training organisations.	Worcestershire	2017	FWAG	SAVWP

WRC LWG HS 01	6.15	Identify wet grassland SSSI sites where current grazing is detrimental to management objectives. Identify remedial measures required to achieve favourable management.	Worcestershire	2010	NE	SAVWP, FWAG
WRC LWG HS 02	6.15	Identify wet grassland SWS sites where current grazing is detrimental to management objectives. Identify remedial measures required to achieve favourable management.	Worcestershire	2010	WWT	SWS Partnership, SAVWP, FWAG
WRC LWG FR 01	4.11	Establish resources required to implement suitable grazing management on wet grassland SSSI's.	Worcestershire	2010	NE	SAVWP, FWAG
WRC LWG FR 02	4.11	Establish resources required to implement suitable grazing management on wet grassland SWS's.	Worcestershire	2012	WWT	SWS Partnership, SAVWP, FWAG
WRC LWG HS 03	6.4	Discuss and implement grazing regime with landowner and ensure objectives are understood on wet grassland SSSI's.	Worcestershire	2010	NE	SAVWP, FWAG
WRC LWG HS 04	6.4	Discuss and implement grazing regime with landowner and ensure objectives are understood on wet grassland SWS's.	Worcestershire	2012	WWT	SWS Partnership, SAVWP, FWAG
WRC LWG HS 05	6.12	Where appropriate ensure that wet grassland habitat is included within high quality, nature conservation-focused restoration plans for the after-use of minerals sites.	Worcestershire	2017	WCC	WWT, SAVWP
WRC LWG HS 06	6.12	Ensure that there are no adverse impacts on adjacent wetland sites resulting from extraction permissions granted.	Worcestershire	2017	WCC	WWT, SAVWP
WRC LWG FR 03	4.1	Identify and target landowners adjacent to important wet grassland sites for entry into Higher Level Stewardship. Secure and implement Higher Level Stewardship Grant for capital and revenue funding.	Worcestershire	2010	NE	WWT, SAVWP, FWAG

WRC LWG HC 01	7.4	Integrate BAP habitat gains into capital and management projects.	Worcestershire	2017	EA	SAVWP
WRC LWG AP 01	1.6	Ensure that the Severn Catchment Flood Management Plan includes measures and policies that conserve and enhance existing and planned wet grassland sites.	Worcestershire	2009	EA	WWT, SAVWP, NE

WWT – Worcestershire Wildlife Trust **NE** – Natural England **SAVWP** – Severn and Avon Vales Wetlands Partnership
FWAG – Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group **WCC** – Worcestershire County Council **EA** – Environment Agency

SAVWP – Severn and Avon Vales Wetlands Partnership consists of the following organisations: Environment Agency, Natural England, The Wildlife Trusts, Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, Defra, National Farmers Union, Association of Drainage Authorities, County and Local Councils, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, Severn Trent Water.

The **SWS Partnership** consists of the following organisations: Bromsgrove District Council, Country Landowners Association, Environment Agency, Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, Malvern Hills District Council, National Farmers Union, Natural England, Redditch Borough Council, Worcester City Council, Worcestershire County Council, Worcestershire Wildlife Trust, Wychavon District Council, Wyre Forest District Council.