

Local Wildlife Sites – South East Wales Project

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

No.5 Marshy Grassland

What is Marshy Grassland?

Marshy grassland or wet grassland occurs on poorly drained, mainly acidic sites in lowland areas (valley bottoms and upland fringes) with high rainfall and wet soils. The habitat is usually dominated by various rush species and can have tussocks of Purple Moor-grass. It is often found with other habitats, such as wet heath, wet flushes, scrub and drier grassland, making up a patchwork mosaic of diverse places that support a correspondingly rich diversity of wildlife.



Devil's Bit Scabious



Ragged Robin



Southern Marsh Orchid

What wildlife does it support?

Good quality habitats, despite having much Rush will also be rich in flowering plants with species such as Ragged Robin, Marsh Violet, Marsh Bedstraw, Lesser Spearwort, Southern Marsh Orchids and Devil's Bit Scabious, amongst others. The habitat can also support a rich fauna with birds such as Reed Buntings and Snipe, Otters, amphibians and many invertebrates, the most significant of which is the Marsh Fritillary butterfly who's caterpillars feed on Devil's Bit Scabious.



Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary



Otter



Reed Bunting

Why preserve/enhance it?

Species rich Marshy Grassland is a much reduced habitat, of which South Wales is a real stronghold, and you can justifiably feel proud to have such a superb resource for wildlife on your land. This habitat is special for the varied species it supports and is particularly vulnerable to inappropriate drainage and "improvement". It is therefore of great importance that it is protected and enhanced 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 and/or degradation of this habitat:

- Development i.e. building of roads, housing etc.
- Agricultural improvement – particularly drainage but also ploughing, reseeding, fertiliser or herbicide treatment, slurry application, conversion to arable.
- Too little grazing – Taken over by rushes and ultimately scrub.
- Too heavy grazing – Wildflowers being grazed out and ground poached particularly if undertaken when ground is very wet.
- Abandonment and neglect – Taken over by rushes etc. and ultimately scrub.
- Tree planting.

Management Recommendations

These management recommendations are similar to those provided within a separate Toolkit No.6 for Marshy Grassland (with Marsh Fritillaries) but are more focused on general marshy grassland management. If Marsh Fritillary butterflies are present please request the more specific Toolkit No.6.

Preservation/enhancement of Marshy Grassland

Grazing

The best way of managing the grassland is grazing. Whilst noting that all sites are different the following provides guidelines as to the general grazing regime that is recommended:

- The site should be grazed by cattle or ponies (sheep are generally not suitable as they can graze away many of the valuable flowers, though very extensive or occasional sheep grazing can be acceptable but requires close monitoring).
- The following livestock types have been proven to be suitable: hardy breeds of suckler cow, Holstein Friesian dairy replacements or stores, hardier beef stores (such as Welsh Black or Belted Galloway) and native ponies (such as Exmoor or Dartmoor).
- The cattle or pony grazing should be extensive in nature and should be limited to spring and summer on wetter sites, although autumn/winter grazing or all-year grazing can also be suitable, particularly on drier sites.
- In general, a low stocking rate over a longer period is preferable. As the habitat varies between sites and over time stocking rates may also need to vary to reflect prevalent conditions but as a general rule stocking rates should not exceed 0.2-0.3 livestock units/ha/year.
- On seasonally grazed sites, roughly 1 cow every hectare (2.5 acres) for three months per year is recommended.
- Grazing animals should be removed if the drier areas get grazed very short or if the ground is too wet.

Scrub cutting

Given the extensive nature of grazing there is the potential for some scrub to develop on the site.

- Small amounts of scrub are acceptable and may provide some shelter for invertebrates and perches for birds, however cover of >5% is likely to be detrimental particularly if encroaching into grassland.
- It is best to cut a little each year between October – February (to avoid the bird breeding season).
- It may also be necessary to treat the stumps with a suitable herbicide.
- The total clearance of scrub should be avoided however as it adds to the overall wildlife value of the land for other species.

Refer to separate Toolkit – No. 11 Scrub Control for more detail.

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

Invasive weeds

- Control the spread of highly invasive weeds, Himalayan Balsam in particular can be a particular problem in Marshy Grassland.
- 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 (there are similar non-problematic species in marshy grassland, these should be left.)

Other management

Whilst grazing and some scrub cutting are likely to be the only management required and recommended there are a number of other techniques which may apply in certain circumstances.

Burning

Burning is a recognised technique for managing Marshy Grassland habitat however, it can kill caterpillars and other wildlife and if it is necessary then the following should be considered:

- Only burn on sites with a recent history of burning.
- Only burn between January-March.
- Avoid burning more than one third of a field in a year.
- Cool, quick fires are best but are difficult to control so cut firebreaks or use natural fire breaks such as wet areas or ditches.
- Any burning undertaken must be in line with 'The Heather and Grass burning Code'.

Mowing

Mowing is generally unsuitable for sites where important invertebrates such as Marsh Fritillaries are known to breed but can be a useful tool to restore sites to a more suitable status if they have become overgrown and very tussocky. Once in a more favourable state then the ongoing management should revert to grazing.

Ditch maintenance

Ensure ditches remain wet at appropriate times of the year, especially during hot summers. This may require installation of simple dams.

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

Tel: 01600 740600

e-mail: info@gwentwildlife.org

Wildlife Trust of South & West Wales

Tel: 01656 724100

e-mail: info@welshwildlife.org

Other toolkits available are:

No.1 Neutral Grassland (Hay Meadow)
No.2 Neutral Grassland (Pasture)
No.3 Acid Grassland
No.4 Calcareous Grassland
No.6 Marshy Grassland (with Marsh Fritillaries)
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
- ❖ Further advice on grazing: www.grazinganimalsproject.org.uk/
- ❖ Marsh Fritillary information: www.butterfly-conservation.org/files/marsh_fritillary-psf.pdf
- ❖ Heather & Grass Burning Code: www.wales.gov.uk/topics/environmentcountryside/farmingandcountryside/plantsseedsbiotechnology/heathergrassburning/heatherandgrassburningpi/burningcode/?lang=en

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