

## Species Rich Grassland HAP



### Objectives

1. To maintain existing species rich grasslands in favourable condition, according to Natural England criteria
2. To restore degraded species rich grasslands and ensure their conservation
3. To create robust grassland habitat networks by promoting sustainable low-input grassland management throughout the National Park and concentrating restoration and creation works in biodiverse hotspots

### Introduction

Of the 45,000 hectares of grassland in the National Park, there is thought to be around 1,150 hectares of species rich grassland. The Tabular Hills in the south of the National Park still supports diverse limestone grasslands, although the plateaux areas have been largely improved for agriculture. Elsewhere in the National Park the majority of grasslands have been improved for agriculture, although a few flower-rich hay meadows and pastures survive. The majority of the unimproved acid grassland occurs on the moorland edge habitat.

During the 1970s and 80s, grassland habitats in the Park suffered because of agricultural intensification, in much the same way as they did throughout the UK. The patches of unimproved habitat that did survive are fragmented and are generally restricted to steep banksides, very shallow soils, the margins of watercourses, and road verges (covered under Species Rich Road Verge HAP Review). Species rich grassland is therefore considered to be the most threatened habitat in the Park.

Inevitably, most conservation effort has concentrated on fragmented sites still classed as unimproved as these are the most diverse and support the greatest number of threatened species. The conservation and enhancement of these sites must, however, be managed in a way that recognises the importance of habitat continuity and encourages the sympathetic management of grassland throughout the National Park.

### Progress (2008-2012)

- NP staff have assisted with HLS applications for the;
  - Maintenance of species rich semi-natural grassland, covering 162ha
  - Restoration of species rich, semi-natural grassland, covering 216ha
  - Creation of species rich, semi-natural grassland, covering 18ha
- HLS agreements also cover the following, where the target feature in some cases include important grassland plants, but did not qualify for the above species rich categories;
  - Maintenance of grassland for target features, covering 555ha
  - Restoration of grassland for target features, covering 187ha(HLS figures from Natural England's national dataset, as of December 2012).

- 21 NYMNP Wildlife Conservation Schemes (WCS) and Farm Scheme Agreements included species rich grasslands sites (it was not possible to separate species rich grasslands from lowland wetland). Towards the end of the lifespan of this HAP changes to NYMNP priorities has resulted in a list of possible grassland WCS sites being identified but it has not been possible to offer agreements at this time.
- During the lifespan of the Grassland Project\* (2006 - 2009) 98.44ha of scrub control was carried out on land not within Agri-Environment Agreements.
- Work by volunteers between 2009 – 2010 included 7.76ha of scrub control on land not within Agri- Environment Agreements. (Scrub control was also carried out through a number of NPA Agri- Environment Schemes but these were not counted towards this action.)
- Since 2010 annual scrub control has continued on sites with and without Agri-Environment schemes. Emphasis has changed since the Grassland Project finished and the first option would always be to instigate the national Environmental Stewardship Schemes to manage grassland appropriately and then 'top up' with NP schemes where needed.
- During the Grassland Project\* (2006 - 2009) management of grassland sites included;
  - practical management work, including bracken management, undertaken on 63 sites (~155ha)
  - on areas where it was required to help restore sites outside of general farm management (31 sites)
  - on areas to kick-start existing or new management agreements (32 sites)
- The Grassland Project\* (2006 - 2009) supported land managers to re-introduce grazing where appropriate. 39.42ha of land was managed with fencing erected to allow grazing, or by arranging grazing of the site.
- 150 grassland and wetland sites (~420ha) were monitored during the Grassland Project\* by the Grassland Project Officer (with a particular concentration on limestone grasslands). This increased our knowledge of the status of species rich grassland in the Park.
- Species rich grassland surveys are carried out by NP staff in conjunction with other NP projects but are not always specifically targeted.
- 63 land managers were provided with expert advice from NP staff \*
- At the start of this HAP the NPA Agri-Environment team used mapped data to identify opportunities and target sites for restoration and creation works. Particular focus was on extending the existing site networks within the CAN DO and Grassland Fringe areas of the Park. Towards the end of the 2008-2012 HAP this action was carried out through Improving Habitat Connectivity program, which also involves mapped data being updated to represent the current state and size of species rich grassland areas. This work is on-going.
- All available information has been collated into a grassland management database.
- NP and Community volunteers have been active in grassland management, including;
  - Thistle and hog weed control at Peat Rigg
  - Bracken and thistle control at Lund Farm
  - Seed spreading at Harriet Air
  - Cutting, raking and seed spreading to create a mini species rich meadow in Rosedale Churchyard
  - Cutting, raking and seed spreading at Scotland Farm
  - Volunteers play a huge role in grassland management work in the Park, in 2012 alone 29 days volunteer days focused on grassland sites
- The nature conservation interest of species rich grassland habitat to local communities and the public has been promoted through 19 walks / talks / events /

media promotions, including a Yorkshire Post article on species rich grassland in Rosedale (June 2011).

- One event was also undertaken to demonstrate the restoration and re-creation of species rich grasslands within the farming community.

\*N.B. all figures taken from the Grassland Report are from 2006-2009. Not all occurred during the life of the 2008 – 2012 LBAP / are not known whether work was carried out within life of this LBAP.

## Case Study

### Daleside Farm Grassland Creation

A site was identified at Daleside Farm near Hawnby where a species rich grassland could be created. The overall aim was to create flower-rich semi-improved limestone grassland, not only to provide new habitat but to help buffer the existing grassland interest in the area. It would also link the field to the wider habitat network. By creating better, bigger and more connecting habitats such as species rich grassland, our landscape can support more wildlife. These ideas have been built on in our new priorities to improve habitat connectivity.

Before the grassland creation the site of 6.7 hectares was improved and re-seeded grassland pasture. The vegetation was predominately white cover and perennial rye grass, with little species diversity. The site is surrounded entirely by semi-improved and unimproved grassland.

Initially the field was intended to be managed as a hay meadow, to be cut and baled. But as nutrients depleted over time the field was expected to be used for pasture.

Using Countryside Stewardship funding, a plan was drawn up and agreed with the farmer, to cover the three main areas of grassland creation work;

1. Site preparation to create a weed-free seed-bed
2. Seed collection, transfer and spread
3. Site aftercare by managing weeds, adding more seed if required and maintaining the site into the future

Works began early 2009, with NYMNPA staff working closely with the farmer and local contractors. The site was prepared by grazing sheep followed by spraying the area with glyphosate to kill existing vegetation. Thistles in adjacent fields were also spot sprayed to avoid them reseeding on the new grassland site.

Although Daleside Farm site is surrounded by good grasslands, these were difficult to harvest seed from, being on steep slopes, hummocky ground, or having thistle infestations. The site therefore used a composite of three local seed sources, one of which, Winterfield, was itself a meadow created from green hay, undertaken 15 years previously.

Here donor hay was cut from Winterfield, three miles away. The hay was collected by a forage harvester straight into a muck-spreader, which then spread its load evenly across the field. Hay was not cut from the weedier strips at the boundaries and the valley bottom, but volunteers hand collected seeds here including cowslip and yellow rattle. Hay was also cut and raked at Cam Farm Quarry, Scawton, and spread on the receptor site along with seeds hand-collected from adjacent Gowerdale.

By November 2009 the site had already begun to green over but ribwort plantain, common cat's ear, common mouse-ear, self-heal, bird's foot trefoil, common sorrel and oxeye daisy

were already growing across the whole site. Luckily there was also no sign of the previously abundant white clover!

Since then, several volunteer tasks have been undertaken using lazy dog tools to remove spear thistle rosettes and pull ragwort. The farmer let his sheep in to eat off the abundant chickweed initially present at the western edge of the site and spot sprayed any denser patches of nettle and thistle that appeared. A species list was compiled in 2011 which showed that there were still quite a few species of disturbed ground present, but very strong populations of several grassland species, especially red clover and yellow rattle. The field has been cut for hay each year.