

Wildflower Grasslands – an Introduction



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Grasslands are wonderful places for wildlife. In summer, they can be alive with wildflowers, bees, butterflies, grasshoppers and birds. In winter months, they may provide hunting grounds for barn owls or kestrels and hibernation sites for insects and reptiles.

Meadows and pastures rich in wild plants have often evolved over hundreds of years of careful and deliberate management as they were grazed by livestock or cut for hay for winter fodder.

Sadly, many such meadows and pastures have been lost in the last century as they ceased to be important to the agricultural economy. Sites have been lost to ploughing for arable use, to development and to agricultural improvements as fields have been re-seeded to produce higher volumes of hay, grazing or silage. The single biggest cause of loss may well have been neglect, as sites ceased to be grazed or cut for hay and became covered in scrub and woodland.

The care of meadows and pastures is one of the highest conservation priorities for lowland England. All of the threats to grassland sites, especially neglect, continue to affect grasslands in Norfolk.

Norfolk Wildlife Trust can provide support and advice to those who care for flower-rich meadows.



Where are grasslands found in Norfolk?

Virtually everywhere! The sandy soils of North Norfolk, the Brecks and the river terraces across the county support acid grassland, alongside heather heaths; wet grasslands and fens are found along river valleys or where drainage is poor; and on chalky outcrops, calcareous grassland may be found, with characteristic species such as greater knapweed and rockrose. Old hay meadows, grazed pastures and open commons are found on the neutral soils and boulder clays of south and mid-Norfolk.

Understanding the value of grasslands

Recognising the wildlife value of a meadow means knowing a few things about the site's history and identifying some of the plants that grow there. It is useful to know if a site has been ploughed in the past, whether it has been seeded, how it has been mown or grazed, and whether artificial (chemical) fertilisers have been applied in recent years.

A few species (see below) will help determine whether a meadow is one of the very few unimproved meadows left in Norfolk, or whether it has been agriculturally improved in some way. Although agriculturally improved meadows can be of value for wildlife, their value can be enhanced and they may require specialised management.

Saving Norfolk's Wildlife for the Future

How to manage a meadow

Caring for wildlife meadows requires careful thought and planning. With this in mind, NWT recommends that owners and managers seek advice, especially when managing unimproved grasslands.

Management usually involves implementing a cutting or grazing regime geared towards retaining the species found in the sward, but it may also be necessary to control the development of scrub on the site, or to control weeds such as ragwort. Information sheets available from NWT cover meadow management and ragwort control, but there are a few key dos and don'ts:

Do

- Seek advice on appropriate management.
- Remove cuttings after mowing – leaving them in situ will enrich the soil, which will discourage wildflowers.
- Use hay cutting equipment, flail collectors, forage harvesters or strimmers rather than rotary cutters or 'toppers'.
- If your field has short turf, leave a bit uncut or ungrazed for a summer and see what comes up, especially if the site has not been treated with fertilisers or herbicides for years.
- Avoid overgrazing – this can lead to poaching and bare ground that will just encourage thistles, nettles and docks to become established.
- Avoid undergrazing – this leads to dominance by more vigorous grasses at the expense of more fragile plants and can allow scrub or bramble to develop.

Don't

- Apply fertilisers or broad-spectrum herbicides.
- Plant trees or shrubs – these will shade out wildflowers.
- Create new ponds or scrapes without advice on a good location.
- Clean out old ditches without advice – water levels have changed in recent decades and draining a site could have a detrimental effect on wild plants.



Richard Osbourne

Meadows and pastures in Norfolk basically fall into 3 broad categories:

Unimproved grasslands are the richest grasslands for wildlife and have been managed in a traditional way for decades. They can contain 50 or more different plant species, including some that are scarce. On neutral (those not on very acidic soil or chalky soil) look out for: oxeye daisy, cowslip, ragged robin, dyer's greenweed, orchids, sweet vernal grass, crested dog's-tail, lady's bedstraw and bulbous buttercup. Also look for ant hills.

Semi-improved grasslands may have been ploughed, sometimes many years ago, or had a few applications of artificial fertiliser. However, they still retain some wildflowers and native grasses. For neutral meadows these may include common knapweed, yarrow, germander speedwell and Yorkshire fog.

Improved grasslands contain very few native grasses and occasionally some robust wildflowers, such as creeping or meadow buttercups and hogweed. These meadows can be enhanced for wildlife.



Gemma Walker

Green Recovery Challenge Fund

