

MENDIP CALCAREOUS & NEUTRAL GRASSLAND HABITAT ACTION PLAN



Action plan name

Mendip Calcareous and Neutral Grassland

Background and vision

A unique feature in the Mendip District is that species rich calcareous and agriculturally unimproved neutral grassland can be found side-by-side along with acid grassland and Heathland. This intimate mix of grassland types is a special feature of the hills in Mendip District. The neutral grassland on the tops of the Mendip plateau tends to support species such as Ladies Mantle more normally found in more northerly grasslands. While these characteristics are found across the Mendip hills, this Biodiversity Action plan and its targets relate to the hills within Mendip District only.

Calcareous grassland also occurs on the ridges of the mid-Somerset Hills which stretch across the low-lying Somerset Levels and Moors like the fingers of a hand and the northern most ridges run into Mendip District.

There are also some areas of lowland meadow within the Somerset Levels and Moors in Mendip District.

Many of the Mendip District grasslands are particularly important for a range of rare butterflies such as the Chalkhill Blue, Duke of Burgundy Fritillary, Adonis Blue and a wide range of important plants such as Bee Orchids,

Green-winged orchids and Cheddar pink. The mix of different grassland types provides habitat for the Brown Hare.

Additionally, where there are old lead-workings, there are specially adapted plants that grow on soils contaminated by high levels of lead. Many such species are rare or scarce nationally. Such areas are usually indicated by the presence of species such as Sea Campion and Spring Sandwort.

LBAP actions on Grasslands in Mendip District are aimed at meeting landscape scale targets set out in the 'Rebuilding Biodiversity/Nature' methodology, concentrating efforts on 'Strategic Nature Areas' as shown in the Regional Spatial Strategy. Rebuilding Biodiversity/Nature Map targets within Strategic Nature Areas will be met through a combination of measures:

- Increasing the average patch size of Priority Habitat Types
- Increasing the average patch size of Priority Habitat Type managed sympathetically
- Decreasing the distance between Priority Habitat Type patches
- Ensuring that Priority Habitat Type patches cover a range of altitudes and aspects to enable a wide range of conditions to be met
- Increasing the connectivity between Priority Habitat Type patches by sympathetic management of linear features as biodiversity corridors

Plan species and habitats

Lowland calcareous grassland
Lowland meadow

Two other habitats that occur in intimate mixes with the above two habitats are:

Lowland Acid Grassland
Lowland Heath

Some areas of species-rich Neutral Grassland in Mendip District fall within the habitat complex Coastal and Floodplain Grazing Marsh.

This Grassland HAP will benefit many species including the following selection:

On Calcareous grassland:

- Chalkhill Blue

- Adonis Blue
- Yellow Vetchling
- Rufous Grasshopper
- Cheddar Pink
- Frog Orchid
- Autumn Ladies Tresses
- Chalk Carpet Moth
- Waxcap fungi
- Skylark
- Barn Owl

On Lowland Meadows (species-rich neutral grassland) and into the more dry acid grasslands associated with lead workings:

- Shrill Carder Bee – is particularly associated with Lowland Meadows on the Somerset Levels and Moors
- Green Winged Orchid
- Brown Hare
- Skylark
- Barn Owl

On areas with thin soils and/or high levels of lead support:

- Lead Moss
- *Habrodon perpusillus* (moss)
- *Rhytidium rugosum* (moss)
- Spring Sandwort
- *Calendonia Convoluta* (lichen)

Also found in grassland habitats in the Mendip District:

- Skylark
- Barn Owl

Habitat status

Lowland Calcareous Grassland and Lowland Meadows are UK BAP Priority Habitat.

Calaminarian grasslands (old lead workings with specialist flora) are both a UK BAP Priority Habitat and an EU Habitats Directive Annex 1 Habitat.

Lowland Acid Grassland, another UK BAP Priority Habitat, is also likely to benefit from this HAP.

There are a number of SSSIs with grassland in Mendip District and several of these form part of the North Somerset and Mendip Bats Special Area of Conservation.

Specific impacts/threats

- **Agricultural improvement** – ploughing and re-seeding, particularly on the Mendip plateau. Fertiliser and slurry application. This is particularly an issue on land less than 2 Ha which is not subject to the Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations for uncultivated land.
- **Dense scrub invasion** – this is a key problem on the Mendips Priority habitat type grasslands and is currently a reason why some SSSIs are not in favourable condition.
- **Dense bracken invasion** – again currently a key problem.
- **Lack of grazing** – as well as contributing to bracken and scrub spread, lack of grazing leads to species-rich grasslands becoming denser and coarser. Small plants are out-competed leading to a loss of biodiversity.
- **Climate change** - could lead to loss of some species
- **High levels of aerial nitrogen deposition** - could lead to loss of botanical richness due to nutrient enrichment

Proposed partners

Mendip District Council (MDC)
Mendip AONB
National Trust (NT)
Grassland Trust (GT)
Somerset Wildlife Trust (SWT)
Tubney Trust
Private Landowners
Quarrying Companies
Natural England (NE)
Private landowners
Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG)
Ministry of Defence (MOD)
Bristol Water (BW)

Current action

- Mendip Hills Living Landscapes Project
- SWT Reserve Management
- National Trust Reserve Management
- Countryside Stewardship and Wildlife Enhancement Scheme Funding
- Management on SSSIs to achieve favourable management by 2010
- AONB work
- Agri-environment Schemes

Target description and target goals

- 1.** To maintain existing extent of Lowland Calcareous Grassland and Lowland Meadow
Goal: LBAP priority habitat 554 Ha Lowland Calcareous Grassland and 439 Ha Lowland Meadows in Mendip District
- 2.** To maintain quality of existing BAP priority habitat grassland. This will partly be met by the measurable target. But actions go beyond this numerical target which only applies to SSSIs:
Goal: 100% grassland SSSI units in favourable condition by 2011
- 3.** Carry out work to restore or re-create Lowland Calcareous grassland and Lowland Meadows within SNAs.
Goal: 180Ha and 330 ha respectively by 2011
- 4.** To achieve required match funding for Mendip Hills Living Landscapes Projects (to match Tubney Trust funding)
Goal: £184 k by end of 2011

Key factors

- Match Funding for Tubney Trust Funding of Mendip Hills Living Landscapes project.
- Additional funding for work in areas outside the Parish of Priddy in Mendip District.
- Availability of HLS funding to achieve habitat restoration/recreation goals.
- Successful partnership working.
- It may be necessary to revise Strategic Natural Area boundaries to ensure that these reflect the most realistic areas for achieving Rebuilding Biodiversity/Nature Map boundaries.

- Undergrazing is a key issue and it may prove desirable to expand the existing Grazing Animals Project in the Mendip District.
- The whole of Mendip District already has an aerial photo baseline. Field survey is now necessary to Habitat Survey which will enable targeting and monitoring outcomes.
- Current SNA boundaries may benefit from some revision.