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Lowland Meadows

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What are they?

A perfect picture of the British countryside, rolling meadows filled with wild flowers are actually actively managed grasslands. Unimproved by fertilisers, lowland meadows and pastures may be cut for hay in late June to early July after the summer profusion of colourful flowers. The flowering plants set seed before the hay is cut and the meadow is grazed in autumn. Found on neutral, mainly clay or loam soils, lowland meadows provide rich wildlife habitat and are treasured components of our pastoral and historical landscapes.

Walk through a peaceful meadow and your head will fill with the scent of wildflowers. The hedgerows, bright with spring blossom, provide excellent nesting and feeding sites for birds such as chiffchaff and reed bunting. Delicate gatekeeper and holly blue butterflies flutter through the grasses, kestrels hover overhead, badgers make tracks through the grasses and ditches provide shelter for frogs.

Where are they found?

Less than 15,000 hectares of unimproved neutral grassland remains in the UK – an area roughly the size of Bristol. Most sites are relatively small and fragmented, but major concentrations can be found in places such as Worcestershire, the Somerset Levels, parts of Wales and the Western Isles in Scotland.

Why are they important?

Each part of the UK boasts its own specialities, but the one characteristic shared by traditionally managed lowland meadows is the high number of herbs and grasses – they can frequently boast up to 30 grasses and 100 or more wildflower species. Grasses include quaking-grass, sweet vernal-grass, crested dog's-tail and red fescue, while flowers include devil's-bit scabious, pepper saxifrage, green-winged orchid, snake's-head fritillary and adder's-tongue fern. In damper areas, cuckooflower, ragged-Robin and yellow iris can be found, as well as rarer species like narrow-leaved water dropwort.

Bees and butterflies, such as meadow brown, common blue and the rare marsh fritillary, are among the hundreds of insects which probe the grassland flowers for nectar. In turn, these attract rare horseshoe bats and many declining farmland birds, including skylark, whose numbers have more than halved over the last 25 years. Corncrake is another specialist meadow bird that is now extinct in lowland UK except for in the Outer Hebrides.

Are they threatened?

Before the Second World War, meadows dripping with wildflowers and humming with insects would have been a familiar sight across lowland UK. But in recent years, over 95% of our lowland meadows have disappeared. Without care, those meadows that are left become rank, as vigorous grasses shade out delicate wild flowers and brambles take over.

Farmers rightly take pride in the increases in agricultural productivity which they have achieved through ploughing, drainage, increased fertiliser and herbicide application, and earlier cutting for silage. Sadly, the costs for conservation have been high. Once the most common type of wildlife habitat in the UK lowlands, species-rich meadows are now few and far between. Intensively managed perennial rye-grass-dominated fields have replaced traditionally managed neutral grassland with little to attract birds or bees.

How are The Wildlife Trusts helping?

Across the UK The Wildlife Trusts are working to prevent further loss of our lowland meadows by looking after many neutral grasslands as nature reserves. We use traditional management techniques, such as hay-cutting, reseeding and grazing, to help them to continue their colourful yearly cycle.

The Wildlife Trusts also provide advice and guidance for landowners and farmers on wildlife-friendly practices in these areas. By ensuring that the land surrounding our reserves is looked after sympathetically for wildlife, we can create a Living Landscape: a network of habitats and wildlife corridors across town and country, which are good for both wildlife and people.

What can I do to help?

- Take part in conservation measures on your land – ask your local Wildlife Trust for advice on grazing and management methods for lowland meadows.
- The Wildlife Trusts are working to protect and restore grasslands for wildlife across the UK, you can support our work by becoming a member of your local Trust.
- Volunteer with your local Wildlife Trust and help your local grassland wildlife; you could be involved in everything from scrub-cutting to wildflower surveying.
- Support wildlife-friendly, traditionally managed farms by purchasing direct from local farms.

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