



GLNP
GREATER LINCOLNSHIRE
NATURE PARTNERSHIP

Calcareous grassland
A guide to management



Calcareous grassland: A guide to management

The key features of lowland calcareous grasslands are that they occur on shallow, base-rich soils generally overlying limestone rocks including chalk. They support a rich variety of lime-loving plants and while typically found as part of pastoral or mixed-farming systems, they are also commonly found in old quarries and along road verges.

Why are they important?

The majority of lowland calcareous grassland sites are relatively small and scattered and have declined in both number and wildlife value as a result of changes to agricultural practices.

Restoration and creation opportunities do occur however, particularly on sites where quarrying activities have ceased.

Published figures for this decline vary significantly, but current estimates suggest the extent of lowland calcareous grassland in England is 65,567 hectares.¹

In 2016, GLNP habitat data suggests lowland calcareous grassland makes up 677 hectares of Greater Lincolnshire's farmed landscape.²

Lowland calcareous grasslands feature free-draining, nutrient-poor soils where competitive species are unable to flourish. Such habitat can support a wide variety of lime-loving plants and characteristic species include salad burnet, upright brome, common bird's-foot-trefoil, glaucous sedge and pyramidal, bee and fragrant orchids.

Sites are also important for a wide range of invertebrates and pollinators which thrive on the rich flora. If there is a mosaic of habitats this can favour many scarce and declining birds.



Common blue © Steve Chilton

Decline in extent and wildlife value of calcareous grassland is largely the result of changes in management practices such as grazed pasture being converted to arable production. In particular, a reduction in livestock farming, as well as a decline in rabbit populations, has led to a rise in coarse grasses and scrub.

Other factors include under (or over) management of roadside verges – while many are mown primarily for road safety with a visibility strip, the remainder of the verge is unmanaged.

¹ Natural England, Extent and condition of priority habitats, April 2015

² For calculations contact the GLNP



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Managing your grassland

The selection of your land as a Local Wildlife Site is recognition of the management that has taken place to date in helping to provide a rich habitat for flowering plants and other species. It does not affect how you choose to manage your land in the future, however the GLNP is keen to support landowners who wish to maintain and improve the wildlife value of their site.

There are a number of good practice management techniques for lowland calcareous grasslands, however the methods you choose will depend on various factors such as the size of your landholding, time and resources available to you and which species groups you are keen to encourage.

A key consideration is for management to maintain a mosaic of habitats. Ideally this should include a mixture of short turf and longer vegetation, small areas of scattered scrub and some bare ground.

Wherever possible, nutrient levels should be kept low as this helps to maintain a wide range of flowering plants. Application of fertilisers encourages the growth of highly competitive coarse grasses, lowering overall species diversity, and should be avoided.

Recommended management practice is to maintain calcareous grassland through grazing by sheep or cattle. Use of smaller cattle such as Dexters helps to avoid poaching, but encourages some beneficial trampling. Stocking density is also important as too much grazing may result in uniform short swards with little of the structural

diversity required, whereas undergrazing will result in colonisation by coarse grasses and dense scrub. Excluding grazing between April and mid-July will allow flowers to set seed, helping to maintain a diverse population of species.

If grazing is not feasible, then another option is to undertake management by cutting and removal to prevent nutrients from building up on site. The best time to cut is late summer - the later it is, the more plants will get a chance to set seed.

Top management tips:

- Graze between mid-July and April
- If necessary, a late summer cut with removal of cuttings
- Keep nutrient levels low i.e. avoid application of artificial fertilisers
- Keep control of scattered scrub with cutting as required

Scattered scrub is an important part of the grassland habitat but it is important to manage it. If grazing is not achieving this then additional cutting may be required. Ideally this should take place from November to February to avoid disturbance to breeding birds but while also giving consideration to any berries as an important winter food source.



Further information



Calcareous grasslands commonly support a variety of orchid species © Sarah Baker

A list of good practice links on managing calcareous grasslands for wildlife is available on our website: www.glnp.org.uk/your-land/habitat-management/calcareous-grassland

Funding to support management work may be available depending on individual circumstances. A list of both current national and local grant schemes is available on the GLNP website: www.glnp.org.uk/your-land/funding

If you are planning to change, or introduce, management on a site then you may need to consider whether protected species such as bats, reptiles or breeding birds use the site. For more information on this visit: www.gov.uk/wildlife-licences

The Lincolnshire Environmental Records Centre may also be able to provide useful species data for your site: www.glnp.org.uk/partnership/lerc

This leaflet is intended as a general overview only - different sites will have different requirements. It is advisable to obtain bespoke/professional advice before any work is undertaken. This guide should not supersede management plans linked to ongoing grant schemes.

Achieving more for nature

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Front cover photo: Bee orchid © Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust