



HABITATS

Photos: Lowland grassland – David Chandler, Verges – Regina Ebner

Grassland

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All about grassland

- Grassland makes up almost 40% of land in the UK – the single biggest type of land cover.
- "Improved" grassland is that which is managed for specific uses, including agriculture and has had fertiliser and herbicides added.
- "Unimproved" grassland will also have been managed but without the use of artificial additives.
- Grassland includes amongst others, parks, school playing fields, roadside verges and lawns.
- Grassland is not only populated by grass, but includes many other native species.

Upland grassland



Upland grassland is found at higher altitudes in the UK such as the Yorkshire Dales. It is typically unimproved or semi-improved. The land is often grazed and is more suitable for cutting for hay than moorland and mountain.

Flora includes blue moor-grass, common rock rose, purple moor-grass, quaking grass, marsh bedstraw, Yorkshire fog, self-heal, creeping bent and creeping buttercup.

Fauna includes skylark, curlew, lapwing, redshank, buzzard, black grouse, snipe, mountain ringlet, northern brown argus.

Management Key principles involve the balance of grazing and allowing for heathland/ woodland regeneration where appropriate. The richest upland grasslands for plants, insects and mammals are best maintained by low density cattle grazing and through the reduction in the numbers of sheep grazing on upland pasture. This will help to create a diverse sward (different layers). Burning of grassland upland areas is very rarely beneficial.

However the restoration of some grasslands into scrubby heathland or woodland can also help to create a richer mosaic of upland habitats.

Learn more wildlifetrusts.org/habitats/grassland/upland-calcareous-grassland/
wildlifetrusts.org/habitats/grassland/upland-acid-grassland-and-rush-pasture/

Lowland grassland



Lowland grassland covers a large area of the UK and ranges from intensively managed dairy farms in Cheshire to the largest area of chalk grassland in Europe on Salisbury Plain. The ways in which these two extremes could be managed for conservation will look very different but the principals remain the same; minimising artificial inputs and encouraging biodiversity.

Flora may include wild thyme, small scabious, common bird's-foot-trefoil, orchids, knapweeds, juniper, yellow rattle, cowslip, fritillary.

Fauna may include stone curlew, woodlark, small copper, green hairstreak, wagtail, common frog, grass snake.

Management Even in the smallest grassland areas mowing less often will allow the grasses and other plants to produce flowers and seeds. This will encourage pollinators and other insects as well as providing habitat and food sources for birds and small animals.

Learn more wildlifetrusts.org/habitats/grassland/lowland-meadow-and-pasture
wildlifetrusts.org/habitats/grassland/lowland-calcareous-grassland
wildlifetrusts.org/habitats/grassland/lowland-dry-acid-grassland

Hay meadows



Hay meadows can be either upland or lowland grassland and have a management style based around taking a cut of hay in the summer. This allows time for the grasses and other plants to flower and set seed, while providing opportunities for insects and other animals to breed without disturbance. Traditional hay meadows have declined steeply in recent decades due to moves toward silage.

Flora may include sweet vernal grass, lady's mantle, melancholy thistle, globeflower, common sorrel, pignut, wood cranesbill, early purple orchid, common twayblade.

Fauna may include yellow wagtail, lapwing, redshank, snipe, and a wide variety of nectar-loving invertebrates.

Management One of the biggest threats to unimproved grassland is allowing the fertility to increase so that the more competitive plants take over. Removing mown grass will help to avoid this issue.

Learn more wildlifetrusts.org/habitats/grassland/northern-hay-meadow

Verges



The most important characteristic of verges is that they provide long and often continuous corridors between other habitats. There is significant habitat potential, even in short verges, because they are unimproved. Verges tend to reflect the underlying soils and so can support almost every habitat type. In the UK there are 238,000 ha of road verges, covering a network of over 4,800 km.

Flora Verges are home to 720 species of flowering plants in the UK (that's half of the UK species). Many verges include species like oxeye daisies, red campion, English bluebell, lesser celandine and a wide range of orchid species.

Fauna Well managed verges are home to a wide range of insect, mammal and bird species. Important species relying on road verges include European hedgehog, woodmouse, grass snake, European kestrel and many solitary bee and wasp species

Management The Lawton report (link below) notes the importance of connecting patches of habitat that have become islands and the need for our natural areas to be "bigger, better and more joined up." Verges fulfil a critical role in this.

Learn more nhm.ac.uk/discover/why-road-verges-are-important-wildlife-habitats.html | plantlife.org.uk/uk/our-work/publications/road-verge-management-guide | The Lawton report thomsonec.com/teh/chapter-7-others-guidance-and-reports/making-space-for-nature-the-lawton-report-2010-england/

Churchyards



Churchyards and burial grounds are an important habitat in their own right and can provide some of the richest habitat for a range of plant, insect and bird species anywhere in the UK. Churchyards in England alone cover an area of at least 14,000 ha. They are often the only fragment of unimproved, wildlife-rich grassland in a local area and a wildlife haven, in an otherwise very managed landscape.

Flora Churchyards can be incredible spaces for many specialist meadow plants including meadow saxifrage, pignut, bulbous buttercup, cuckoo flower and the majority of Britain's orchid species.

Fauna can include rapidly declining bird species such as spotted flycatcher and are a great location for house martin, swifts, European kestrel, bullfinch and yellow hammer. Mammals: includes common frog, common toad, newt species and all 3 species of UK snake as well as slowworms, European hedgehog, woodmouse, grass snake, European kestrel and many solitary bee and wasp species.

Management The key here is to leave large areas uncut during the spring and summer months to help pollinating insects, small mammals and bird species. To maintain biodiversity, avoid using pesticides, insecticides and fertilisers. It is also important to avoid cleaning gravestones unnecessarily as this will help maintain a wide range of lichen and fungi.

When cutting grass areas, don't forget to remove cuttings to reduce the fertility and encourage wildflowers in the next season.

Learn more ecochurch.arocha.org.uk/resources/land/ | churchofengland.org/resources/churchcare/advice-and-guidance-church-buildings/biodiversity | caringforgodsacre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/FLOWERING-GRASSLAND.pdf

Gardens



Approximately 87% of households in the UK have access to gardens or private green spaces. That means that there are over 20 million gardens in Britain. Surveys suggest the average size of a garden is 190 sq. m but some rural gardens are much bigger. The total area of gardens in Britain is likely to be over 4300 sq. km. which is nearly 4 times the size of greater Manchester.

Gardens are in trouble. Increasingly they are hard surfaced, manicured and tidy spaces that leave little to no space for wildlife. There is a continued decline in mature gardens as well as the number of ponds. However all is not lost and turning around the fortune of gardens is something that most of us can do together.

Flora There are nearly 30 million trees in British gardens. Many of these trees are remnants of former native forests and can be valuable spaces for many woodland plants. Typical wildflowers include betony, bellflower, viper's bugloss, knapweed, primrose, lily of the valley, dog rose and wood anemone. Gardens can also be great spaces for mosses, lichens and fungi, especially waxcaps.

Fauna Gardens are important places for a range of farmland and woodland bird species including coal tit, great spotted woodpecker, bullfinch, green finch and nuthatch. They are also critical for some of our fast declining summer migrants such as spotted flycatchers. Small mammals and reptiles also abound in wilder gardens and these can be excellent spaces for shrews, voles and mice as well as the species that prey on them, such as grass snake. Gardens are probably the best spaces for iconic species like red fox and European hedgehog.

Management The key here to wildlife friendly management is to keep it messy! Gardens which include areas of unmown grass, compost heaps and log piles provide excellent habitat for many species. The addition of native trees and a pond as well as native wildflowers will provide sources of food for insects, birds and mammals. In addition it is important to minimise the use of fertilisers, insecticides and pesticides, as many of these will attack non-target organisms and reduce biodiversity dramatically. Gardens also are an opportunity to grow food sustainably and to use alternatives to peat. Finally it is worth recognising the importance of gardens for reducing the impact of climate change. Wildlife rich gardens are not only good for helping species through the landscape but the additional presence of trees and wildflowers helps to reduce air temperature and bind soil during drought and storm events.

Learn more nationaltrust.org.uk/features/nine-ways-to-build-a-wildlife-friendly-garden | nhm.ac.uk/discover/seven-ways-to-create-a-wildlife-friendly-garden.html | wildlifetrusts.org/gardening | wlgf.org

Grassland management

In managing grassland for conservation there is a lot to be learnt from traditional methods. Not using pesticides and herbicides will encourage biodiversity, and a mowing regime that allows grasses and other plants to set seed before cutting will attract pollinators and other insects as well as providing habitat and food sources for birds and small animals.

DID YOU KNOW? A seeded UK lawn will only have around 5 of the UK grassland species.

A species-rich chalk downland can have more than 50 different plant varieties including harebells, cowslips and orchids.

Undisturbed soils capture and hold carbon very effectively, so conversion of arable fields to permanent grassland is an easy carbon win.

Old tussocky grassland is particularly favoured by owls as it supports large populations of small animals on which they prey.

How can we help?

- Sow a wildflower lawn mix either in a new area or by adding to an established lawn.
- Avoid use artificial fertilisers and herbicides because it will reduce the diversity of flora and fauna.
- Note: in the UK, totally unmanaged grassland is likely to quickly become scrub woodland.
- Find out what is appropriate and likely to work in your area, especially in light of climate change.
- Even in the smallest grassland areas mowing less often will allow the grasses and other plants to produce flowers and seeds. This will encourage pollinators and other insects as well as providing habitat and food sources for birds and small animals.

Learn more

- buglife.org.uk/resources/publications-hub/habitat-management/
- woodlandtrust.org.uk/trees-woods-and-wildlife/habitats/grassland/
- Book: Britain's Habitats, S. Lake, D. Liley, R. Still, A. Swash, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015.
[wob.com/en-gb/books/sophie-lake/britain-s-habitats/9780691203591](https://www.amazon.co.uk/wob.com/en-gb/books/sophie-lake/britain-s-habitats/9780691203591)
- Contact an A Rocha UK naturalist at naturalist@arocha.org