

Species-rich Grassland: important habitats along the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

A CHAIN OF SIX IRON AGE HILLFORTS dominates the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge. Around their earthen ramparts stretches a mosaic of species-rich grassland, broadleaved woodland, and open heath, flanked by meres and mosses. These varied yet fragile habitats support unusual plants and animals, many of them adapted to specific historic land uses.

By restoring and enhancing these increasingly threatened landscapes, the vision is to create an interconnected and expanding network of woodlands, grasslands, wetlands and heath around the hills that will benefit both people and wildlife for years to come.

Changes in Farming

Traditional grasslands are a summer delight: bright with wild flowers and native grasses, rushes and sedges; vibrant with insects, birds and butterflies. Scarcely a generation ago they were common across Cheshire. Now they are a rarity, not just in Cheshire and the UK but across the rest of Europe, too.

In fact, Britain has lost more than 95% of its traditionally managed grassland since 1939; in Cheshire, the loss is closer to 99%. The post-war drive to grow more food brought big changes to farming. Ancient permanent pastures were ploughed and re-sown with faster growing grasses. Seasonally managed hay meadows were turned over to silage. Increased drainage, herbicides and artificial fertiliser helped the new 'improved' grasslands produce more crops.

The other side of the coin was a loss of complex habitats that had taken centuries to evolve — and the loss of the wildlife they contained.

Cheshire Grassland

Cheshire's species-rich grasslands are alive with insects and the birds and mammals they support

Traditional Grassland

Oddly, most grassland is man-made habitat. Until the first farmers began clearing the wildwood to grow crops, around 6,000 years ago, natural grassland was limited to a few woodland glades, the uplands and the coast. Grassland plants and animals soon colonised the newly cleared ground. For thousands of years, farmers managed these grasslands using a combination of low-intensity grazing and mowing, with only the occasional application of manure.

The Cheshire Plain's glacial sands and clays are better suited to cows than crops; and Cheshire has been famous for its milk and cheese since Roman times. Generations of gentle management of pastures and hay meadows encouraged the growth of specialised communities of plants and animals. Typical 'unimproved' grassland contains a rich variety of native grasses including meadow fescue, crested dogs-tail and common bent. Sprinkled among the stems are colourful wildflowers such as bugle, betony, knapweed, pignut, ox-eye daisy, bird's-foot trefoil and rough hawksbit. This complex ecosystem supports specialised invertebrates tuned to seasonal patterns of grazing and cutting. The insects, in turn, support breeding 'grassland specialist' birds such as grey partridge, lapwing, skylark and snipe. Traditional grasslands are abuzz with wildlife.



Farming with Nature

Yet, despite having survived for thousands of years, traditional grasslands can still be damaged by even a single application of mineral fertiliser or slurry. As soil fertility jumps, the rampant grasses crowd out the wildflowers and herbs, and the insects and birds they support.

It doesn't have to be this way. Since the 1990s, agri-environment schemes have helped land managers work with conservationists to maintain food production while safeguarding the countryside for future generations. Many farmers recognise the importance of traditional grassland habitats, and manage them accordingly. 'Unimproved' grasslands survive on farms across Cheshire. Churchyards, playing fields, railways and roadside verges frequently support similar habitats, too.



Grassland Flowers

Unimproved grasslands are bright with meadow flowers

“Almost 99% of Cheshire’s ‘unimproved’ species-rich grassland has been lost since 1939.”

Cheshire Wildlife Trust

At the eleventh hour, species-rich 'unimproved' grassland has been recognised as a 'UK Priority Habitat'. Its conservation and re-creation lies at the heart of conservation priorities in Cheshire. It seems traditional grassland has a future.

Grassland for the Future?

Even so, there are problems to be overcome. Much of Cheshire's remaining 'unimproved' and 'semi-improved' grassland is restricted to pockets of inaccessible land — along river valleys, on steep slopes, and in other areas difficult to farm. These fragments are often prone to either overgrazing or neglect. They may also be too small or isolated to support sustainable wildlife populations.

The rapid loss of Cheshire's traditional grasslands is just one example of the increasing uniformity and impoverishment of our countryside. Faced with such a widespread loss of habitats and the biodiversity they support, nature conservation must now look beyond a few scattered nature reserves and designated areas to protect and improve the countryside as a whole.

To reverse the decline, we must identify, protect, restore and extend the county's traditional grasslands. Volunteers are surveying known sites and occasionally finding new ones, often leading to their protection as Local Wildlife Sites. Traditional grassland is being restored across Cheshire. And work has already begun to restore and expand areas of species-rich grassland along the sandstone ridge and the Dee and Gowy river valleys. The goal is to create a sustainable ecological network across Cheshire.

A series of other guides is available. Look out for four walks leaflets, four habitat leaflets, and six hillfort leaflets.

CASE STUDY

Grassland Restoration at Boothsdale

BOOTHSDALE IS A DEEP TREE-LINED COMBE that cuts into the steep, western scarp of the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge immediately below Kelsborrow Castle, near Kelsall. The dale's 'unimproved' lowland meadows are home to grassland wildflowers such as yarrow, common knapweed, ribwort plantain, creeping cinquefoil and bird's-foot trefoil. There's an encouraging absence, too, of introduced grasses such as perennial ryegrass and timothy. But years of under-management have seen a slow decline in native species, and the consequent spread of bracken, scrub, and invasive Himalayan balsam.

Boothsdale's sloping fields were restored as part of the Habitats and Hillforts project. Old hedges have been laid and infilled with native species, and longhorn cattle brought in to graze and open up the soil. Invasive Himalayan balsam has been hand pulled by British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, and scrub and seedling trees cut back. Restorative grazing by cattle continues. The results are encouraging, and will be carefully monitored as the meadow and its wildflowers develop.

“We needed expert advice on the Himalayan balsam growing in our field. The Habitats and Hillforts project has done an amazing job.”

Mary Jane Greenhalgh, landowner



 SandstoneRidge

Key habitats Species-rich Grassland



Habitats along the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

This leaflet was originally produced as part of the Habitats & Hillforts Project (2008-12) with the generous support of the Heritage Lottery Fund. To learn more about the work of the Sandstone Ridge Trust and its partners, visit

www.sandstoneridge.org.uk

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