

Grasslands

Which grasslands are important for wildlife?

Although grasslands are the dominant land use cover across Devon, there is great variation in their wildlife value.

Grasslands are highly sensitive to disturbance or nutrient enrichment. Their wildlife interest can be very quickly lost through the use of fertilisers (especially artificial/inorganic fertilisers), herbicides and lime or through cultivation and reseeded. This gives rise to improved grassland – impoverished in species, dominated by a few aggressive or competitive grasses and very few wildflowers. Disturbance and neglect of all grasslands can give rise to weed problems especially docks and thistles.

Species-rich grasslands are increasingly rare. They are often important for invertebrates which, as well as being important themselves, provide a vital food source for other species. Nectar-producing wildflowers provide food for many insects, particularly butterflies and moths. Native grasses support the caterpillars of many species.

Grasslands can support protected and rare species (eg adders, orchids, butterflies) and provide habitats which support important numbers of species which provide food for other rare species (eg raptors feeding on small mammals in rough grassland).

What are the statutory requirements relating to grasslands?

Important grasslands are protected through their designation as sites of importance for nature conservation, eg [SSSIs](#), [SACs](#), and [County Wildlife Sites](#). Alternatively certain plant or animal species within a grassland may have statutory protection.

What opportunities are there for mitigation and additional wildlife gains for grasslands?

Protection of grasslands during construction

It is beneficial to wildlife and landscape to retain as much of the native vegetation present on a development site as possible, rather than trying to introduce new planting. It is particularly important to retain existing species-rich grasslands.

If areas of grassland are to be retained, fencing should be erected around them and instructions given that no vehicles or plant are to enter the protected area, and that there is to be no dumping or lighting of fires.

Sometimes it is necessary to remove some turf to lay underground services. It may be possible to carefully remove turf immediately prior to works and replace it as excavation proceeds. Ideally this should be done in the dormant season, with the time lag between removal and replacement kept to a minimum. This is preferable to re-seeding with an inappropriate seed mix.

Creating new grasslands

Where ground has been disturbed and needs replanting, a native wildflower and grass mix can be used, rather than the standard rye grass which has little value to

wildlife. It is important to avoid the use of fertile top-soil and to create a fine tilth with sub-soil. The seeds used must be native to the area, and be suitable for the habitat and soil type.

A specific regime of cutting and removing coarse species is needed for the first few years, after which a single mow in late summer with removal of cuttings may be all the maintenance needed.

Seed for a wildflower meadow is usually sown at a rate considerably lower than that for amenity grassland mixes – this compensates for the initial higher seed costs. Subsequent maintenance costs will be significantly lower due to the single annual cut. Therefore the provision of an area attractive to both people and wildlife also makes economic sense.

A grassland can be recreated by natural colonisation, without actually seeding it. If, for example, the new grassland is being established to replace one lost during construction, the removed soil could be used to form the basis for the new grassland – if it is considered to be of sufficient botanical interest. The topsoil contains the seed bank, therefore top-soils and sub-soils should be stored separately and returned to as similar a location as possible.

Managing existing grasslands

Grassland areas can be managed in order to benefit wildlife. Grass should not all be mown short: areas next to hedges should be left to grow long and other areas mown once or twice a year, with the cuttings removed. This prevents a build-up of nutrients which causes coarser weeds to smother the more delicate wildflowers.

Reducing the number of cuts has benefits for wildlife as well as delaying the cut until late summer. This allows plants to set seed and avoids conflicts with other wildlife interests such as invertebrates and nesting birds.