



2. MANAGING WILDFLOWER GRASSLANDS IN THE WEALD

Action for valued grasslands, for now and for the future

MANAGING WILDFLOWER GRASSLANDS IN THE WEALD

Wildflower rich grasslands found on the south-east's Weald clay are an important habitat and an attractive feature of the landscape. The decline in the area covered by these special grasslands has become a serious threat to biodiversity. With this in mind, the Weald Meadows Initiative (WMI), the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) and others have been active in encouraging both farmers and non-farming landowners to manage existing grasslands and to enhance and create new wildflower grasslands.

This information sheet provides information on the management of species rich grasslands on the soils typical of the Weald. This is recommended in the first instance. Information sheets are available on the enhancement and creation of such grasslands and WMI also produce a number of other information sheets.

Left alone, grasslands will eventually turn to scrub. Grassland swards need regular management for their survival, to enable the land to be used for grazing or for hay, if that is what is required, and for maintaining their character and species diversity. The timing and extent of management activities such as grazing, light poaching and cutting will determine how much the sward is opened up. Open areas are important for natural re-seeding, germination and growth of wildflowers and fine-leaved grasses at the appropriate times. The nature of the sward will also determine how effective the grassland is as a habitat for small mammals, invertebrates and other wildlife, e.g. rough grassland for small mammals. The creation of microhabitats and microclimates within the grassland is essential if biodiversity is to be maintained e.g. sheltered areas of long grass by a sunny bank.

Grasslands can be managed as traditional hay meadows with cutting and grazing, cutting only, traditional pasture, rough grassland, wet grassland and improved grassland for hay and silage.

TRADITIONAL HAY MEADOWS

Traditional hay meadow management involves cutting in late July after most of the finer-leaved grasses and wildflowers have set seed and then grazing the re-growth from September until the soil becomes too wet, usually in November or December.

An example of a traditional regime is:

January-February	Light grazing on any new growth (optional).
Early March	Remove grazing before annuals germinate in the first mild conditions.
April to mid July	No grazing before taking the hay cut once the annual wildflowers have seeded (mid July).
Late September-end December	Main grazing period with light grazing mainly down to a short sward height, but some variety in height helps diversity.

No fertilizers should be used but a traditional regime often includes a light application of well-rotted organic manure in the autumn every three years or so. It is worth soil sampling prior to any application of manure.

Managing meadows in this way allows annual wildflower plants to flower and set seed, some wildflower perennials to flower and provides some capacity for invertebrates to breed and over-winter and some birds to nest and feed.

Bumblebees and butterflies will benefit from leaving uncut flower margins, large patches or corners each year, although on larger sites uncut margins should be rotated annually to prevent invasion by rank grass growth.

NON-GRAZED SMALL MEADOW SITES

Cutting should be delayed until after mid-July when plants such as Yellow Rattle have set seed. Spring cutting should take place before the end of February as Yellow Rattle starts to germinate as mild weather comes in the spring.

All cuttings should be removed to prevent smothering of wildflower seedlings and to prevent nutrient build up, which can encourage competitive species.

A suggested timetable is as follows:

mid-February	cut short any significant winter growth leaving 1-2 inches of sward
end October	After all flowering do the main cut and remove all of the sward. Leave some areas left uncut as refuges for invertebrates.

TRADITIONAL PASTURE

Traditional pasture management involves grazing lightly in the spring and summer by sheep or cattle; this allows wildflowers to set seed and to provide a diversity of vegetation structure. A recommended general regime is as follows:

January-February	remove grazing.
March	light grazing only on new growth (optional) - and consider if the grassland contains annuals such as Yellow Rattle germinating at this time.
April-mid July	very light or no grazing.
Mid July-end December	main grazing period, with light grazing over a long period to help create a varied sward height allowing some "islands", corners, margins or tussocks to over-winter.

Traditional pasture management is particularly beneficial to the breeding and over-wintering of invertebrates. It also supports the nesting and feeding of some bird species. Lighter, later and/or less frequent grazing will benefit invertebrates more, whilst heavier grazing in autumn/winter can benefit plant diversity more.

Stock numbers should be regulated to allow a variety of sward heights. Overgrazing creates bare ground, which is easily colonised by aggressive weed species and under grazing leads to the dominance of coarse grasses, Bracken, Bramble and scrub. Fertilisers should not be used as the effect of grazing means that nutrients are being recycled.

ROUGH GRASSLAND MANAGEMENT

Cattle grazing, using Sussex and other hardy breeds, or cutting are both appropriate to maintain rough grassland. As opposed to annual cutting of long grass, rough grassland can be cut in late summer in every second or third year on rotation, and then just enough to prevent the encroachment of scrub.

A minimum cutting height of around 11cm (4 inches) will allow for vole runs to persist and so help to support Barn owls and other predators. Some areas can be cut shorter and more frequently to provide a more diverse habitat which will benefit birds, invertebrates and other wildlife as well as favouring the flowering and seeding of annual and perennial wildflowers. It is possible to have small areas of rough grassland around the edge of traditional hay & pasture fields.

WET GRASSLAND MANAGEMENT

Cattle grazing using traditional breeds are appropriate for wet grassland management and light poaching in the winter can open up some areas of sward to help maintain a diversity of structure and habitat to benefit a range of wildlife.

Wet grassland areas add greatly to the diversity of plants and invertebrates and, if large enough, also birds. Low intensity grazing and raised water levels, particularly in spring, will benefit breeding waders in large open landscapes.

IMPROVED GRASSLAND FOR HAY AND SILAGE

This grassland is often of little value for plants and wildlife and is made up largely of a single vigorous species of grass called Perennial Rye-grass. The aim of this type of grassland is to generate a maximum yield of either silage (wet partially fermented grass) or hay.

However, grassland managed in this way can still have some value if the grassland is unfertilised and if there are uncut wide margins along the edges of fields, which help maintain the diversity of wildlife and wildflowers.

To manage grassland in this way, some rotational cutting (cutting every two to three years in rotation) may be necessary to prevent the encroachment of scrub and Brambles. Alternatively these margins should be grazed along with aftermath grazing in the late summer.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Having read through this information sheet, looked at your site, checked what equipment and skills you will need and studied the suggested timetable and the tasks required, you may have other questions or need further advice before you can get started managing your wildflower grassland. The WMI can help with information and advice and can point you towards other experts, contractors & graziers. If you are in the Countryside or Environmental Stewardship Scheme, managing larger areas of grassland, it would be advisable to speak to WMI or to an adviser at the Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group who will be able to help and also refer you to related government agencies such as Natural England who you may need to consult if you wish to alter your grassland management practices.

WEALD MEADOWS INITIATIVE

The Weald Meadows Initiative (WMI) aims to enable the traditional management of unimproved meadows and the successful establishment of new species-rich grasslands in the High and Low Weald. Recognising the need for wildflower management and creation to be financially viable, it pro-actively develops and markets added value grassland products.

It is a public private partnership between the High Weald AONB Unit, Agrifactors (Southern) Ltd, the Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) and landowners and managers.

AGRIFACTORS

Agrifactors (Southern) Ltd was incorporated in 1970 as an agricultural and horticultural merchant specialising in the supply of grass, clover, forage, fodder, vegetable and flower seeds to farmers, horticulturalists and amenity users in West Kent, East and West Sussex and Surrey. The knowledge built up since 1970, matching varieties and mixtures to soil type, location and specific climatic conditions within their trading area enable it to formulate and mix agricultural and amenity seeds to the user's specific requirements. Its association with the High Weald AONB Unit, the Weald Meadows Initiative and FWAG since 1995 has developed into a worthwhile partnership enabling it to provide a seed source of known local provenance for Environmental Stewardship Schemes within the High Weald. Most of the people involved in the harvesting, drying, cleaning, mixing and despatch of this seed live locally, so that this activity supports the local community.

FWAG

The Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group is a national group led locally by farmers and local organisations. It provides the farming community with a source of independent confidential advice on the management and improvement of existing wildlife and landscape features whilst integrating environmentally responsible, cost effective methods and techniques supported by sources of grant aid and practical assistance.

HIGH WEALD AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY

The High Weald AONB is a historic landscape of rolling hills draped with small irregular fields, abundant woods and hedges, scattered farmsteads and sunken lanes. It was designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in 1983 to aid its protection and management. It covers 563 square miles at the heart of South East England. Wildflower grasslands are a valued feature of the High Weald AONB.

Natural England may be able to offer help and advice.

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