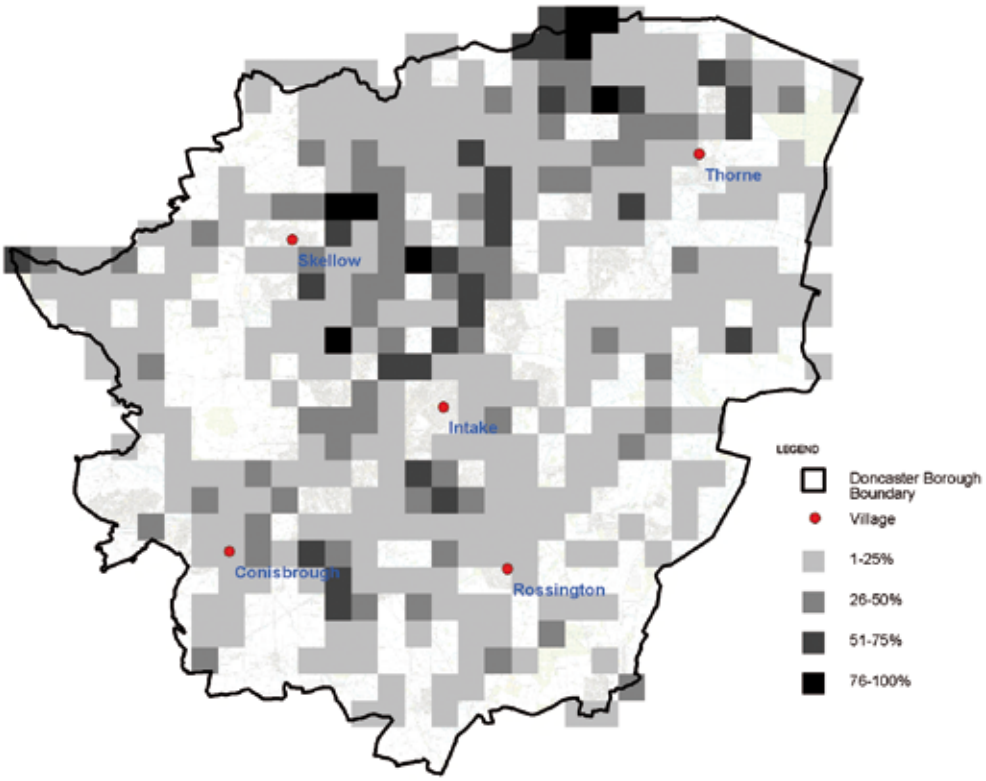
Neutral and Wet Grassland

Summary Habitat Action Plan

Doncaster Local Biodiversity Action Plan
January 2007



1 Habitat description

The low-lying clay and alluvial soils of the Humberhead Levels provide excellent conditions for intensive agricultural production. This landscape tends to be dominated by arable cultivation, improved grazing pastures and rye-grass leys but some small pockets of unimproved and semi-improved neutral grasslands still survive. In areas of damper or deeper soils, floodplains, or in areas of low-lying poorly drained soils are fragments of flood-plain grazing marshes and damp grasslands, often with areas of wet woodland and scrub. These tend to have less diversity of flowering herbs and are dominated by tall and tussock-forming grasses.

Improved grasslands account for the great majority of all grassland found in rural and urban parts of the UK. There are less than 15,000ha of species-rich neutral grassland in the UK. Wet grasslands, including floodplain and coastal grazing marshes are estimated at 300,000ha but only a small proportion supports a high diversity of native plant species. Many areas of pasture-dominated agriculture have been improved by more efficient land drainage which has allowed conversion to arable cultivation; however, pockets of grassland survive within farms, on railway embankments, in old quarries, churchyards and along ancient rights of way, and as road verges. Most areas of unimproved grassland are small fields, often associated with a landscape of hedges, green lanes and small woodlands, and are relicts of a former pre-enclosure landscape.

2 Characteristic species

Common bent
Quaking grass
Crested dog's-tail
Red fescue
Spring sedge
Glaucous sedge
Yarrow
Black knapweed
Lady's bedstraw
Field scabious
Cowslip
Bulbous buttercup
Yellow rattle
Great burnet
Pepper saxifrage
Betony
Common sorrel
Meadow vetchling
Lesser stitchwort
Devil's-bit scabious
Self-heal
Common cat's-ear
Pignut
Snake's-head fritillary
Bitter vetch
Dyers greenweed
Green winged orchid
Hedge garlic
Cuckoo flower
Tufted hairgrass
Meadow foxtail
Common blue butterfly
Small skipper
Small copper
Orange –tip butterfly
Specked-wood butterfly
Elephant hawkmoth
Harvest mouse
Shrew
Field vole
Rabbit
Red fox
Barn owl
Kestrel
Meadow pipit
Skylark
Lapwing
Curlew
Snipe

3 Current factors causing loss or decline

- Water abstraction from the Sherwood Sandstone aquifer has lowered ground water levels. Past flood defence works have deprived the floodplain grasslands of their natural cycle of flooding.
- Agricultural intensification, re-seeding and the use of artificial fertilisers lead to a reduction in diversity. Land drainage allows intensive arable agriculture, resulting in habitat loss.
- Management for silage rather than hay results in earlier and more-frequent cutting of grasslands, which affects ground-nesting birds and prevents flowers setting seed.
- A trend from mowing management to spring and summer grazing can result in the loss of those plants which are unable to withstand grazing pressure.
- There are fewer mixed farms and therefore fewer grazing herds available.
- Unsympathetic management of roadside verges and salting of roads causes loss of species diversity and changes in habitat type.
- Fragmentation and loss caused by development, or by agricultural intensification.

4 Objectives, targets & proposed actions

Objective	Target	Ref	Action	Lead & Partners
2) To restore degraded sites and ensure appropriate management of Neutral and Wet Grasslands.	6 sites with management plans by 2010.	2.1	Develop and implement grassland management for grassland in public ownership. Review existing plans to ensure compatibility with HAPs and SAPs.	Environment Agency (EA), DMBC
	5 sites by 2010.	2.3	Identify all grassland sites where Priority Species are present and implement appropriate specialist management schemes to benefit these species.	DMBC, Natural England (NE), Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG), Private landowners
3) To create 2 ha of neutral grassland, linked to existing marsh, ponds grasslands, woodland and scrub habitats within the Humberhead Levels and Coal Measures Natural Areas.	2 ha by 2010.	3.3	Use new grassland to link existing marsh, fen, woodland, and scrub habitats.	DMBC, NE, FWAG, Private landowners
	Underway.	3.5	Re-create floodplain grasslands by creating new washland areas as part of the flood management on Doncaster's rivers and sustainable management of flood water on development sites close to the river.	EA
4) Raise public awareness of the importance and special characteristics of Neutral and Wet Grassland.	1 demonstration on neutral/ wet grassland by 2009.	4.4	Promote good management practice through the use of demonstration sites and workshops.	DMBC, NE, Linking the Environment and Farming (LEAF), Yorkshire Wildlife Trust (YWT), British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV)

5 This habitat in Doncaster

The following describes where in the Doncaster Borough good examples of this habitat can be found, however, named sites may be privately owned and therefore are not publicly accessible. For further information about this habitat and where it can be found in Doncaster see the 'Neutral and Wet Grassland Habitat Action Plan'.

This habitat is represented in Doncaster on four designated sites; Owston Hay Meadows, Went Ings Meadows, Shirley Pool and River Idle Washlands, and also on over 70 Sites of Scientific interest. Particularly diverse neutral grassland sites include small fields in the pre-Enclosure landscapes of Fishlake and Sykehouse. This habitat is also present on many un-designated road verges, embankments and cuttings.

The Went Valley has some small wet grassland patches along with Fen Carr, Low Ings Lane Meadows, Steward's Ings Lane Meadow and Geeseness Lane Meadows. Castle Hills, Scawthorpe has a surprising diversity of habitat, which is worth exploration.

An interesting grassland feature in the Borough is the 'land tops' or locally named 'rig and fur', which superficially looks like ridge and furrow formation, hence the local name. These lines of high and low land are created to aid land drainage, but also create wet and dry areas in close proximity, thus increasing botanical diversity.

6 How to take part

'Backyard Biodiversity – Nature in your Neighbourhood'

This is a new initiative launched by Doncaster Council to enable local people to learn about, protect and enjoy nature where they live. Community Groups and Organisations can loan activity packs and equipment to enable them to take part in activities such as bird watching, pond-dipping, building bird and bat boxes and bug hunting. The service is available FREE of charge from selected Customer Service Centres in Doncaster. A pack of Wildlife Gardening fact sheets has also been produced, which provides advice and information on how you can help the wildlife in your own garden.

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