

Grassland Habitat Statement

Doncaster Local Biodiversity Action Plan
January 2007





Grasslands Habitat Statement

- 1.1 The majority of grassland habitats in the United Kingdom are of 'semi-natural' origin, having arisen as a result of many centuries of grazing of animals such as sheep and cattle following the clearance of the wildwoods that once covered the land. These grasslands were not sown, but have been created by animal browsing which promoted the spread of plants tolerant of constant grazing e.g. grasses, rosette-forming and herbaceous perennials. Other plants may survive because of their unpalatability or toxicity. Grasslands represent the early stages of natural succession maintained by management.
- 1.2 Exceptions to the grasslands formed by grazing activities are those natural plant communities present in maritime or montane environments where factors such as salt, wind or altitude prevent the establishment of woody plants. Other grasslands may have arisen in recent times from a formerly arable land, which has been sown with grass seed.
- 1.3 Due to the climatic conditions present in much of the UK, trees are the natural climax vegetation. Management, which prevents tree establishment, is thus critical in the maintenance of grassland habitats. Mowing and grazing are the main forms of management but burning has been used in some situations. The term 'meadow' refers to a grassland, which is mown for hay. 'Pasture' is a grassland grazed by farm animals. Meadows tend to be sited on flatter terrain including floodplains, where cutting machinery can be used. Grazing and mowing management create grassland with differing species composition, arising from the fact that mowing and grazing occur at different times of year and that mowing uniformly and indiscriminately removes plant material whereas grazing animals tend to be selective. The introduction of rabbits to the UK has also had a major influence on the continued presence of grasslands, especially where traditional grazing management has declined. Managed grasslands can support a diversity of grasses and flowering herbs as well as providing habitat for a vast array of invertebrates and a variety of ground nesting birds, reptiles and small mammals.
- 1.4 The English Nature Grassland Inventory (1996) highlighted a number of the larger lowland grassland sites within Doncaster, which have high botanical interest. The Lowland Heathland Inventory (1996) also highlights areas of acid grassland, many of which are associated with areas of dry lowland heath and lichen/bryophyte heaths. Some sites are Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI's) and many others are designated as Sites of Scientific Interest (SSI's); however, habitat loss is still a problem increasing the pressures on the few remaining areas of species-rich grassland.
- 1.5 Improved grassland now accounts for the great majority of all grassland found in rural and urban areas. The biodiversity of such grassland is generally low, although they can be of importance for winter-feeding waterfowl or ground nesting birds.

1.6 Relict areas of species-rich grasslands, wherever they occur in the Doncaster Borough, are very important reservoirs of biodiversity. Notable grassland sites such as Owston Hay Meadows, the lawns of Brodsworth Hall, Marr Hills and Holes, Went Ings Meadows, Doncaster Low Common, Rossington Bridge Area and Reedholme hold many of our “rarer” plants and animals. Grazed parkland pastures are now rare in Doncaster; most having been converted to arable, but a small grazed parkland still survives at Hesley Hall.

1.7 The species composition of grasslands is greatly influenced by the nature of the underlying soils, particularly the soil acidity and moisture content. There are at least five distinct grassland types within the Borough:

- Calcareous grassland on the Magnesian Limestone. A unique form of limestone flora is also found on the calcareous moraine of Lindholme Island, surrounded by acid bog.
- Neutral grassland and wet grasslands on the lowland clays of the Humberhead Levels including semi-improved pastures and tussocky unmanaged false-oat-grass grasslands.
- Acid grassland and lowland heathland mosaics on the Sherwood Sandstone ridges and the fluvioglacial sands and gravels to the east and on the Coal Measures to the west.
- Improved grassland which may occur anywhere in the Borough and which originates from re-seeding of species-rich sites or by sowing of arable land.
- Artificial grassland habitats on industrial tips, colliery spoil. The varying pH of the ‘waste’ can produce a unique mix of limestone, acidic and sand dune grasslands.



Habitat Action Plans have been prepared for “Limestone Grassland,” “Lowland Heathland” and “Neutral & Wet Grassland”.

1.8 Scrub habitats also occur in areas of the Borough. Scrub communities are a natural component of many habitats but are often indicative of a cessation of past management. Scrub can often be seen as invasive and a threat in some grassland communities but it is an important habitat in its own right. The presence of scrub in grassland creates a diversity of habitat structure that is used by a range of animals, which would otherwise not occur.



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