

Habitat Management Principles

Background

The western edge of the Cotswolds, based on the scarp, has retained its semi-natural character. It is an area rich in unimproved limestone grassland and ancient woodland, often forming an important matrix of both habitat types. The scarp itself is dominated by permanent pasture, which if managed appropriately, can become more semi-natural in character and form a link between the existing unimproved grasslands.

The woodlands, generally on the upper slopes and crest of the scarp, particularly between Wotton-Under-Edge and Cleeve Hill, also need to be managed appropriately and linked by woodland creation.

These two intertwining habitats would create a landscape scale corridor between Bath and Mickleton, taking in the Stroud valleys en-route, of some 80 miles in length. The establishment of these large-scale corridors is vital for enabling wildlife to adapt to climate change by moving towards a new climate space. This corridor is particularly important for this purpose because of its length and north south axis. The area is also rich in existing large limestone grassland sites with varying gradients and aspects. This further enhances the opportunities for species to adapt to climate change through subtle changes to their “niches” such as a shift in aspect.

The value of the grassland and woodland of the scarp NIA is further amplified because as broad habitat types they include a wide variety of plant communities including different swards, scrub, woodland edge and woodland well suited to helping a wide array of species adapt through moving

The value of this area in terms of creating a viable ecological network is further enhanced by the presence of limestone valleys running across the Cotswolds from the North West to the South East. Draining much of the dip slope of the Cotswolds, the river valleys link the huge wildlife resource of the Cotswold Hills with the Thames valley, the Cotswold Water Park and River Avon. The valleys contain areas of Lowland Calcareous Grassland, particularly in the valley heads and areas of Lowland Meadow along the valley bottoms.

The rivers represent key examples of oolitic limestone rivers, have high wildlife value and are of national importance. The quality of these rivers is threatened by current land management which causes diffuse water pollution.

These primary areas for habitat restoration and connection sit within a wider landscape rich in the “finer grain” of habitat connectivity. The Cotswolds is a priority area for the suite of farmland birds and there has been an emphasis on habitat creation for farmland birds through the “Farmland Bird Target Areas”. This has led to a great deal of work

around the creation of headlands and habitat maintenance and restoration thus increasing the habitat connectivity across the primarily arable areas between the scarp and valleys.

Management Principles

To co-ordinate existing activity, the following principles have been agreed (adopted?) by the Cotswolds Ecological Networks Forum.

The principle objective is to ensure continuity of key habitat across the Cotswolds retaining what already exists and establishing connections by improving management and by habitat restoration and re-creation to form direct connections or stepping stones. It is important to be aware of the wider landscape and what activity (advice, practical works etc) partner organisations are delivering on neighbouring areas to maximise connectivity potential.

Landscape and landscape character is an important consideration. The Cotswolds AONB Landscape Character Assessment and Landscape Strategy and Guidelines should be referred to when considering proposals that impact on land use.

Grassland.

Much of the permanent pasture on the Cotswold escarpment has remained intact and pretty much continuous from Bath around the Stroud valleys and up to Mickleton. Areas of permanent pasture survive around the valley heads and along stretches of valley slope and floor of the Cotswold River Valleys. It is, however, under threat from lack of management leading to the development of a rank sward and scrub. Scrub is becoming a particular threat on the scarp north of Winchcombe and around the Bath area. Woodland creation has seen the loss of some grassland and can form a distinct break in continuity such as the new woodland adjacent to the A417 at the bottom of Crickley Hill. In some places a wooded feel is created by overgrown hedges.

Opportunities exist along the river valleys to improve the management of the existing grasslands and meadows and extending and linking by creation. Changes in farming may limit creation to wide riverside margins

Grassland Management Principles

- Retain existing permanent pasture (unimproved, semi-improved and improved)
- Ensure appropriate management, normally grazing. This includes permanent and improved pasture, which under suitable management, will become more semi-natural in character, creating greater habitat continuity.
- Seek unimproved grassland restoration and re-creation to link or buffer existing grasslands, especially unimproved grassland
- Attempt to create large areas which can be managed through extensive grazing techniques.

- Woodland creation on permanent pasture should not normally be supported unless there is minimal loss and where it is more important to extend and link ancient woodland. No woodland creation should take place on unimproved grassland

Scrub

In some instances, scrub is an important component of the grassland habitat, but it can also be invasive and become a threat to the biodiversity value of a site. Total removal of scrub is generally inadvisable but control is essential.

- Where scrub is to be retained, management should aim to break up the structure (different successional stages), create glades and scalloped edges.
- A scrub management plan is helpful particularly on sites which are important for birds and invertebrates.
- Juniper is present on some grassland sites and is to be positively encouraged.

Hedges

- Overgrown hedges should be brought back into management. This could include coppicing and inter-planting/gapping-up.
- Tall, overgrown hedges, should be brought back into management in turn, especially in areas important for bats and dormice, whilst retaining continuity of foraging lines and links between roosts.
- Ancient hedgerow trees should be retained. Successor hedgerow trees should be tagged or planted. New hedgerow trees may be inappropriate on areas of open scarp, High Wold etc

Woodland

Woodland is more or less continuous on the upper scarp slopes between Cleeve Hill and Wotton-under-Edge and around the Stroud Valleys, forming the well known Beech Hangers. Much of this woodland is ancient woodland and planted ancient woodland and in places forms an important habitat mosaic with grassland. To the north and south of this band and on the High Wold, woodland tends to be in the form of regular estate woodlands or thin lines of trees. Woodland is also a feature of the Enclosed Limestone Valleys to the north and east of Bath, with significant continuous blocks on the valley tops and sides. Much of the woodland is suffering from lack of management leading to even-aged stands and loss of understorey and ground flora.

Woodland Management Principles

- Retain existing woodland and encourage appropriate management. Promote the English Woodland Grant Scheme (future NELMS) for larger woodlands. Small, farm woods, should also be included in agreements .
- Woodland management should seek:
 - Thinning to allow for crown and understorey development

- Clearfelling and coppicing to provide open space and different successional stages
- The creation of rides and glades to form permanent open space and internal edges
- Strategically locate rides and glades to encourage greater continuity and connectivity of grassland and grassland edge habitats
- Deadwood, especially standing deadwood should be retained
- Woodland edges should be thinned to increase scrub depth and reduce wind penetration. This may not be appropriate for scarp edge woodland
- Restore PAWS (Planted Ancient Woodland Sites) to native woodland
- Extend, buffer and link ancient woodlands through woodland creation using the Cotswold Conservation Board's Guide to Woodland Planting and Management in the Cotswolds AONB.

Rivers

The quality of the rivers is threatened by current land management which causes diffuse water pollution. Improvement in water quality will need to focus on the management of the adjoining valley sides where there is a great opportunity to create wildlife corridors based on a mosaic of woodland, scrub and limestone grassland running north and west from the rivers Thames and Avon to the Cotswolds Scarp NIA.

Improving water quality will greatly benefit species including white clawed crayfish, water vole and otter and a wide range of invertebrates