Briefing from The Wildlife Trusts, April 2014

Save our vanishing grasslands



#dontfadeaway

Grasslands are beautiful and valuable habitats that are an important part of our natural heritage.

Writers and artists have celebrated them for generations. They have inspired people for centuries and are just as essential to our economy and well-being as ancient forests, our seas and all the other critical habitats on which we depend. Wildlife-rich grasslands are vital natural resources: for bees and other pollinators, and for an abundance of nature that depends on wild grasses and flowers – from butterflies to barn owls. They help protect our rivers from pollution, hold together healthy soils that store carbon, and enable landscapes to retain water to reduce flooding. High quality pastoral produce – such as beef and lamb – comes from livestock that graze species-rich grasslands or feed on the forage from hay meadows in the winter. Cutting of hay meadows and sensitive grazing is an essential part of the management of our precious grasslands – and farming remains key to their future.

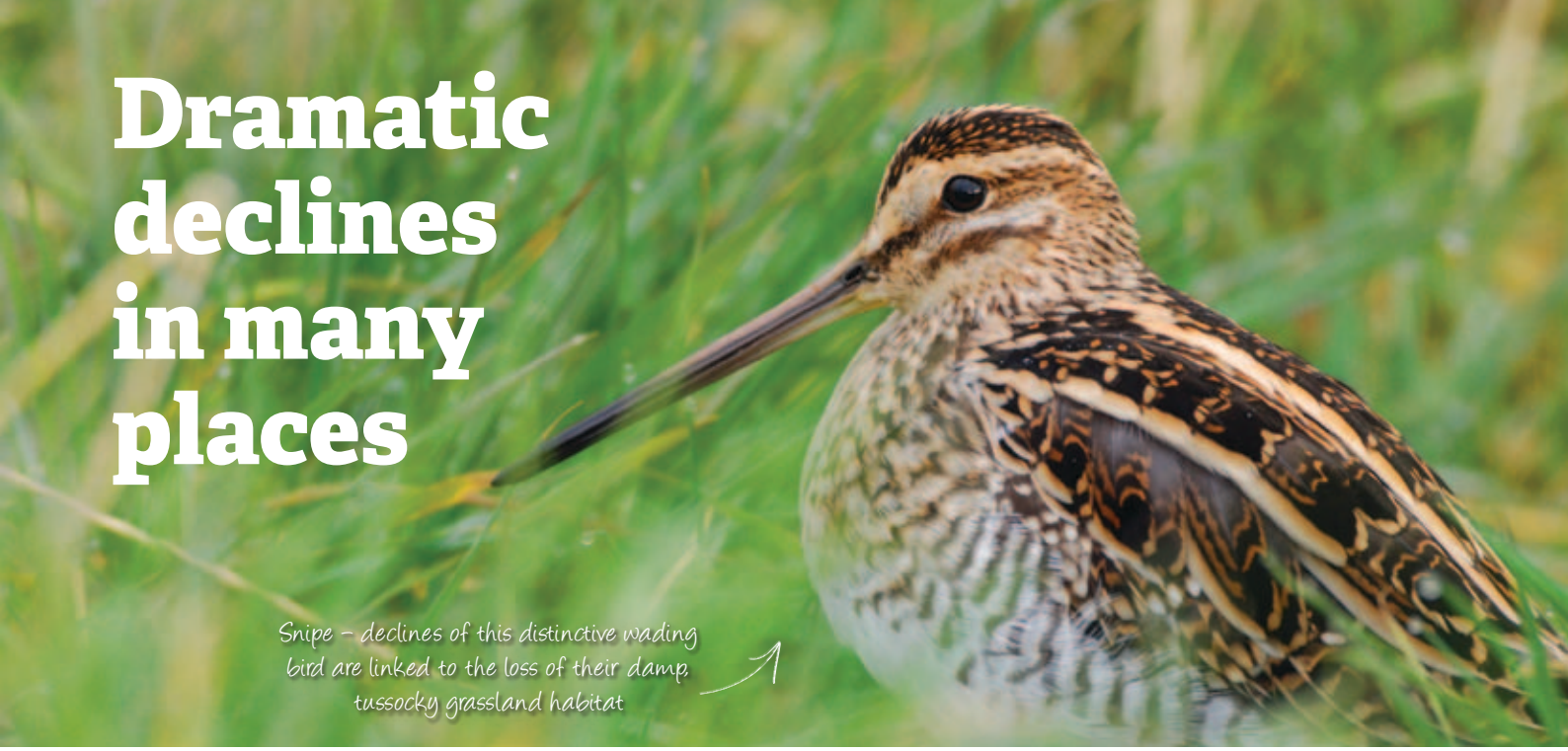
> **"... we have recorded a continued decline in quality across most sites surveyed over the past decade. This insidious loss is continuing apace.**
>
> *Wildlife Trust staff member, Eastern England*

But our wildlife-rich grasslands are vanishing – and the wildlife that depends on them is under threat.

The Wildlife Trusts have been collecting information on the state of locally important grasslands in England – sites like ancient meadows, traditional pastures and road verges – all of which provide vital space for nature. The information we have so far makes depressing reading and we are now calling on government to halt this catastrophic decline. Some sites have gone altogether, lost to development or ploughing. Many more have deteriorated to such an extent that the wildlife that makes them special has simply disappeared and they have been 'de-selected' as Local Wildlife Sites[1] (meaning there is not enough special habitat left to justify keeping the site designated and with some level of protection).

1 Local Wildlife Sites are wildlife-rich sites selected locally for their nature conservation value based on important, distinctive and threatened habitats and species with a national, regional and a local context. In many parts of the UK, they are the principal wildlife resource but their designation is non-statutory and their only protection comes via the planning system. Many are owned by private individuals. For more information see http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/localwildlifesites

Dramatic declines in many places



Snipe – declines of this distinctive wading bird are linked to the loss of their damp tussocky grassland habitat

We have information showing dramatic declines in many areas of the country, for example:

- Nottinghamshire: out of 392 Local Wildlife Sites containing neutral grassland[2] 99 (25%) have been de-selected since 2005.
- Worcestershire: in this county renowned for its classic traditional lowland hay meadows it is estimated that 48 sites (24%), comprising c. 240 hectares, out of a total of 200 grassland Local Wildlife Sites have either been lost, damaged or reduced to sub-optimal condition since 2005.
- Cumbria: surveys of upland hay meadow Local Wildlife Sites between 2008–2011 led to the de-selection of 35 (27%) out of a total of 128 sites. At 15 of the sites the traditional hay meadows previously present had completely disappeared. In the Lake District National Park surveys of 223.47 hectares of hay meadow wildlife sites between the late 1970s and early 2000s led to a staggering 183.26 hectares (82%) being de-selected as Local Wildlife Sites.

> **It was shocking to review our hay meadow Local Wildlife Sites and discover that a whole valley had lost almost its entire meadow resource. One holding had 21 meadows, all gone. In one area nearly all meadow Local Wildlife Sites have been 'improved' and are unrecognisable now.**
>
> *Wildlife Trust staff member, North West England*

This is not a new problem – by 1980 97% of all traditionally managed lowland meadows had gone and losses to other semi-natural grasslands were almost as great[3]. The Wildlife Trusts, The Grasslands Trust, Plantlife and others, have highlighted the tragic loss of beautiful meadows and pastures on many occasions[4] and we are playing our part in working with landowners to restore grasslands for wildlife across the country. But our evidence shows that the decline is continuing apace in the twenty-first century, and because the remaining habitat resource is so small, every single site that is lost or damaged now is a real tragedy for the wildlife our grasslands support, and a real loss for our own future too.

Common spotted-orchids and other wild flowers depend on our grasslands

2 Neutral grasslands develop on soils that are neither acid nor lime-rich and are typical on lowland clays and loams in the midlands and the south of England.

3 Nature's Tapestry (2011) The Grasslands Trust http://grasslands-trust.org/natures-tapestry-report

4 England's Green Unpleasant Land (2002) http://www.plantlife.org.uk/uploads/documents/englands-green-unpleasant-land-2002.pdf

Why our wildlife-rich grasslands matter

Grasslands for inspiration. "The even mead that erst brought sweetly forth the freckled cowslip, burnet and green clover, wanting the scythe..." (Henry V - Shakespeare)

Whilst much of our landscape is characterised by patchworks of green fields, most of these fields have been transformed by modern agricultural methods.

Many fields have been re-seeded with a single grass species or changed by the addition of fertilisers or lime. 'Unimproved' pastures and meadows[5] with their characteristic wealth of wild plants and animals are rare and fragmented – occupying just 5% of their 1945 area. As well as their inherent wildlife value and beauty, these vibrant gems have other less obvious but important qualities. They store water, filter pollutants, help reduce soil erosion and are hotspots for pollinators. Beneath them are precious soils storing carbon and seedbanks of native plants.

Unimproved pastures and meadows store water and carbon, filter pollutants, help reduce soil erosion, store native plant seeds, and are hotspots for pollinators.

5 Five main types of semi-natural grassland (so called because of the influence on the habitat of farming over time) have been identified as a priority for conservation in England: limestone grasslands, marshy grasslands, acid grasslands, lowland meadows and pastures, and upland hay meadows.

6 University of Exeter & Devon Wildlife Trust (2013) Understanding the Hydrology of Culm grasslands; Impact of Culm grasslands on Soils and Water Quality (unpublished initial findings).

CASE STUDY

A recent study in Devon has shown how semi-natural grasslands act as filters to capture soil particles and nutrients from fertilisers before they reach and harm our rivers and reservoirs. Areas of a rare kind of marshy grassland called Culm grassland were compared with areas that had been drained and agriculturally 'improved'. At one study site water level recording found that a metre of well drained 'improved' pasture holds 47 litres of water, whilst an adjacent area of pristine Culm grassland holds an amazing 269 litres per square metre[6]. Such results suggest that well-managed Culm grassland may help reduce downstream flood risk more than either intensively managed grasslands or Culm grasslands that have scrubbed-up. But a recent report on Devon's State of Nature concluded that only 27% of remaining Culm grasslands in Devon are in good condition.

What is happening?

Upland hay meadow in Cumbria discovered by chance by Cumbria Wildlife Trust during a farm survey.

> **I visited the area about three weeks ago. It is probably 10 plus years since I last visited the place, when it was a wonderful downland area, with scrub and rabbit-grazed grassy areas covered in chalk downland plants. All the scrub has been removed and the soil has been ploughed and raked right up to the woodland edge.**
>
> *Wildlife Trust staff member, Southern England*

Wildlife-rich grasslands are under severe pressure from development, agricultural change, mismanagement and neglect.

Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust has been campaigning against a planned development that would damage 30% of the largest calcareous grassland[7] Local Wildlife Site in the county, leading to the loss of 30 hectares of this valuable habitat, with a further area damaged through landscaping. The Trust has consistently objected to the application, but it was approved by the Local Planning Authority in March 2014. These kind of losses to development are happening despite the fact that public bodies have a duty under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006, to have regard to the conservation of biodiversity when carrying out their normal functions.

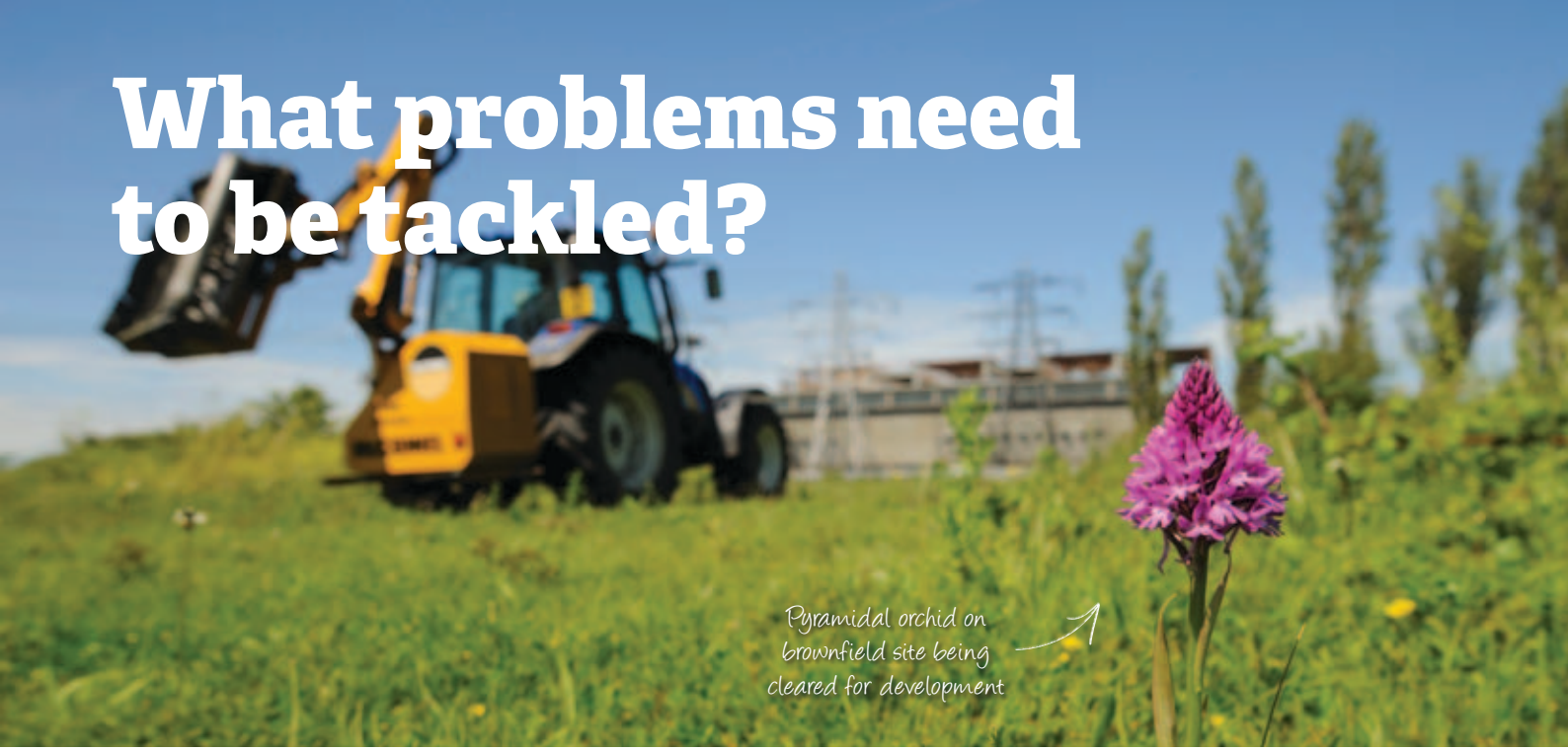
There are some alarming recent examples of grasslands restored under farm environment schemes being ploughed up when schemes end. In Shropshire, areas of grassland that had been in a 20-year Environmentally Sensitive Area scheme in the Clun uplands in south Shropshire were ploughed in 2014 – a change to the land that is bad news for breeding curlew and could put threatened species at risk.

Some precious grasslands have been converted to gardens or overgrazed by horses or livestock. Others have been planted over with trees. Many are rapidly deteriorating because of poor management. Modern machinery and the increased use of fertilised grass for silage fodder means that traditional hay meadow management has declined. Remaining meadows, and also some of our wildlife-rich road verges, are often cut early – before flowers have set seed. In many areas cutting is now done all at once – damaging the wildlife that has made its home in the meadows. Many meadows that would traditionally have been cut in late summer have also been converted to grazing pastures.

Lack of any management is a significant cause of grassland decline in some areas. A 2008 report by Norfolk Wildlife Trust concluded that 69% of a sample of 60 grassland Local Wildlife Sites visited in 2005–2008 were in poor or declining condition. The main problems were inappropriate management and no management, with lack of resources for management a key issue. The Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust reported that the majority of 21 grassland Local Wildlife Sites (covering c. 103 hectares) de-selected since 2005 had lost their wildlife interest due to lack of management, which had also led to the value of a further seven sites declining significantly. In Lincolnshire, half of the grassland Local Wildlife Sites are roadside verges; despite strong support from the Highways Authorities, there is little budget for management that will ensure their future.

7 Calcareous grasslands support a rich flora and lie on shallow, well-drained soils that are rich in calcium carbonate.

What problems need to be tackled?



Pyramidal orchid on brownfield site being cleared for development

The loss and deterioration of wildlife-rich grasslands happens gradually, in a piecemeal way, and often goes unnoticed.

Although our local information provides a strong indication of the problem, there has never been a single national inventory of environmentally important grasslands. So the scale and the value of what is being lost is difficult to measure and not fully acknowledged.

We have been urging the Government to do more for our special grasslands in discussions on implementation of the Common Agricultural Policy 2015–2020 (CAP). But there is little sign of any commitment from Government to fully tackle the issue through the requirements attached to the direct payments that all farmers receive (the 'cross compliance' and 'greening' rules). This is despite the fact that the new EU rules for the CAP 2015–2020 give Member States the option of doing more to protect our grasslands, for example by applying a no-ploughing rule on any that are considered to be environmentally sensitive. The new environmental land management scheme for farmers will undoubtedly help bring SSSI grasslands and some other important sites into good management. But crops like maize provide a far higher level of income, so payment rates for the new scheme must be set at appropriate levels, incentivising farmers to preserve their wildlife-rich grasslands. We believe that the fate of many grassland sites now hangs in the balance and will be determined by impending Government decisions on CAP implementation in England.

Many small but important fragments of grassland are being lost – even in our most valued landscapes.

Some of England's best grassland sites have legal protection through their designation as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). But there are many important sites that do not have this level of protection and in some parts of the country there are relatively few SSSIs. For example only 1.56% of the land area of Nottinghamshire is SSSI, though Local Wildlife Sites cover 10% of the county. These local sites are refuges for nature and help create the ecological networks needed to support viable populations of species. Their protection is reliant on the goodwill of landowners and how Local Planning Authorities implement planning policies.

For grassland habitats that do not have legal protection and that are vulnerable to changes in agricultural practices, the Environmental Impact Assessment (Agriculture) Regulations[8] should prevent their deterioration and destruction. Projects that will increase the productivity of such areas for agriculture, e.g. fertilisation, cultivation or re-sowing, must be screened by Natural England to see if they need consent to proceed. But the regulations are weak and poorly enforced. The threshold at which they apply is two hectares or more, so many small but important fragments of grassland are being lost – even in our most valued landscapes. For example, in the last two to three years, two high quality grassland sites that fell beneath the threshold have been lost to ploughing in the Peak District National Park.

Very often landowners want to help by bringing deteriorating sites into better management – but there is a shortage of grants to help manage sites, especially the smaller fragments.

8 For more information see http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/4038539?category=49001

Save our vanishing grasslands

The Wildlife Trusts, 2014.
Designed by Helen Walsh/
lonelycottage.co.uk.
Photos: p1 & p6 Nick Upton/
npl.com; p2 Laurie Campbell/
npl.com, Helen Walsh; p3
Zsuzsanna Bird, Devon
Wildlife Trust; p4 Cumbria
Wildlife Trust; p5 Terry
Whittaker/2020Vision

Our grassland wildlife – including much-loved species like curlew, skylark and lapwing, as well as a host of butterflies and a huge diversity of grasses, flowers and fungi – will not survive without a long-term commitment, secure funding and effective regulation.

It is time for Government and businesses to fully recognise the value of grasslands for pollination, water quality, water storage, carbon storage and high quality food production. It is time to recognise the value to local economies and communities of keeping places like our hay meadows, chalk grassland and floodplain meadows as attractive features in our landscape. This wonderful 'natural capital' must be fully taken into account in policy decisions on agriculture, planning and water management.

Current measures to protect what is left of our precious grasslands are weak and we are losing irreplaceable sites. As a matter of urgency the Government must act now to halt the loss.

WE WANT TO SEE A FULL REVIEW OF EXISTING PROTECTION FOR ENVIRONMENTALLY IMPORTANT GRASSLANDS. THIS SHOULD:

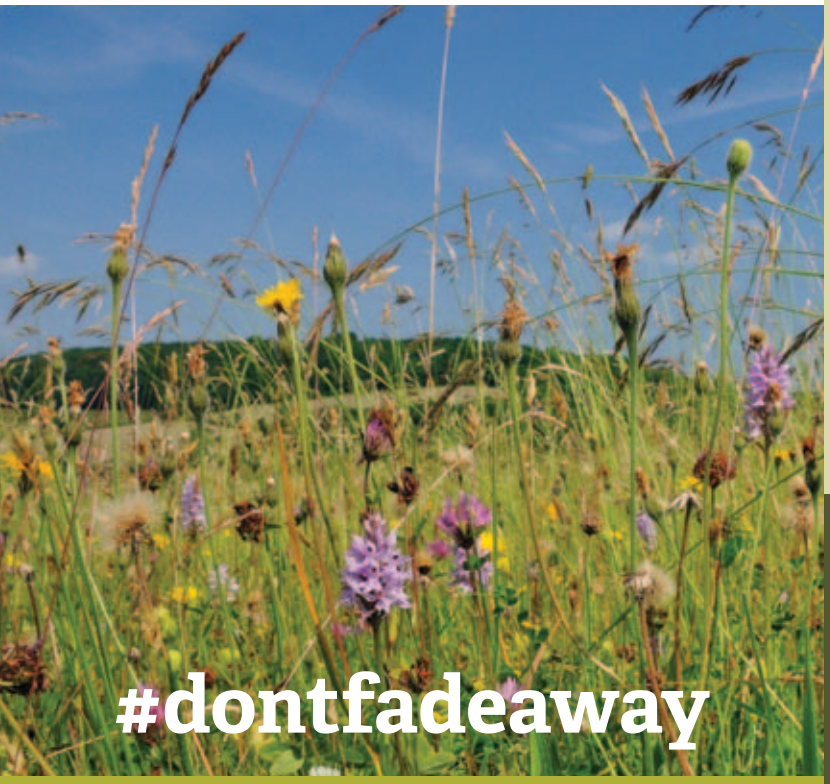
1 Improve existing laws and policies and effectively enforce them –
Environmental Impact Assessment (Agriculture) Regulations need to be strengthened and grasslands should be given better protection through planning policy.

2 Support wildlife-rich grasslands on farmland –
Farmers should be fully rewarded for managing important grasslands (e.g. through farm environment schemes) and stronger requirements for protection should be attached to the direct payments all farmers receive from the public purse.

3 Award statutory protection to more grassland sites that deserve it –
Species-rich grassland sites that qualify should become protected SSSIs (Sites of Special Scientific Interest) as quickly as possible.

4 Set up a national grassland inventory –
A new national inventory of important grasslands in England needs to be established with sustained monitoring of sites in the future.

5 Restore more wildlife-rich grasslands –
Grassland restoration projects delivered in partnership with landowners by local Wildlife Trusts, Plantlife and others should be encouraged and sustained.



#dontfadeaway

If you agree please add your voice to our Save our Vanishing Grasslands petition (wildlifetrusts.org/dontfadeaway). We will be presenting all of the signatures and our evidence on vanishing grasslands to Secretary of State for the Environment Owen Paterson.

wildlifetrusts.org ■ info@wildlifetrusts.org
01636 677711 ■ Reg. Charity No. 207238