

The Importance of Wildflower Meadows

This meadow, full of butterflies and wildflowers in summer, is part of an ancient 3% of meadowland in the UK which has survived destruction over the past 50 years. Most grassy fields have been fertilised and resown with a few vigorous grass species. They grow grass very efficiently and are cut several times a year starting in April, but this means that there is no room for wildflowers or the food plants for the caterpillars of grassland butterflies, and no time for life cycles to be completed before the field is cut. So most of our fields have bright green grass, but no wildflowers or butterflies.

In contrast this meadow contains many species of wildflower like Meadow Vetchling and Black Knapweed which provide nectar for adult butterflies, and native grasses such as Cocksfoot and Yorkshire Fog

which provide food for caterpillars. Traditionally this meadow would have been mown for hay in the summer and then the aftermath grazed in the autumn, a system of management which over the centuries has allowed the rich and varied flora and fauna associated with hay meadows to develop.



BEDELANDS FARM LOCAL NATURE RESERVE MEADOW MANAGEMENT EXPERIMENT

THE EFFECT OF DIFFERENT MANAGEMENT TREATMENTS ON NEUTRAL GRASSLAND

University of Sussex, Centre for Continuing Education
Meadows Research Group with Mid Sussex District Council.
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Management of Wildflower Meadows

This meadow is a product of our farming heritage and without cutting or grazing it will revert to scrub and eventually woodland, becoming once more part of the wood out of which it was carved more than 500 years ago. Since 1991, when Bedelands Farm became a nature reserve, the hay has been cut annually, but there are unresolved questions. In the past haymaking was a slow and weather-dependent job and it took the farmer several months to get round all his fields, so some fields were cut early and some late. When should this field be cut now? Should the hay cut be combined with aftermath grazing as in traditional hay meadows? And what about applying organic fertiliser? This will improve the yield of hay for the farmer, but as the grasses grow more vigorously will the wildflowers decline? In order to answer these questions and to find out the best management treatment an experiment has been set up in this field from summer 1997.

The Meadow Management Experiment

From summer 1997, the field has been divided up into 3 parts and each year the first third will be cut mid-July, the second mid-August and the third mid-September. Which third will have the most wildflowers?

In October and November each year starting in 1997, an electric fence will enclose an area on the west side of the field and sheep will be used to graze the aftermath. Will this area develop a more diverse flora than the ungrazed half? A central 30m wide strip will have organic fertiliser applied at a low rate (68g/M²) in October starting in 1997. What effect will the fertiliser have on the balance of wildflowers and grasses?

Monitoring the Effects of the Different Treatments

The Bedelands Meadows Research Group (University of Sussex, Centre for Continuing Education) is monitoring the effects of the different management treatments and you can find out more through The Friends of Bedelands or Mid Sussex District Council Leisure. Tel: 01444 458166

