

Chalk Grassland Restoration - Winchester Focal Area

Background

Half of the world's chalk grassland is located in the UK, with 16.5% of around 40,000 ha in the South Downs. As well as being rare it's also the richest habitat in Western Europe with up to 40 species noted per sq metre.

In 2012 the South Downs Way Ahead project, consisting of 28 organisations led by the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA), was chosen to trail blaze the Government's new Nature Improvement Area (NIA) scheme, as recommended by John Lawton in the 'Making Space for Nature' Review, see link below.

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130402151656/http://archive.defra.gov.uk/environment/biodiversity/documents/201009space-for-nature.pdf>

The aim was to create more, bigger, better and joined up biodiversity environment sites creating sustainable, resilient and more effective ecological networks across 5 focal areas within the South Downs National Park.

The project focus was this rare chalk grassland habitat which is vital to the survival of rare and endangered wildlife, relied on by millions of people to provide clean drinking water and valuable green space.

In the Western Downs the Winchester Focal Area Group was formed to plan, organise and complete chalk grassland restoration.



South Downs Volunteers completing a scrub management task on a BC site.

The project

The Winchester Focal Area Group is chaired by the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust (HIWWT), with Butterfly Conservation (BC), Hampshire County Council (HCC), Winchester City Council (WCC), Natural England (NE) and the South Downs National Park Authority attending. The group meets every quarter at the NE Winchester offices, at the initial meetings 53 site projects were put forward to restore or recreate chalk downland. 23 of the site projects were then prioritised to complete within the 3 years of the NIA project, these sites covering 268 ha of chalk downland habitat.

There are six chalk grassland target species which are BAP (Biodiversity Action Plan) priority species, namely small blue, Duke of Burgundy, grizzled skipper, dingy skipper, frog orchid and musk orchid, so careful consideration was given to make sure that any management took account of their requirements.

The funding from NIA only contributed to a few of the prioritised site projects, so extra funding was applied for and granted to complete the 2 year Wild About Winchester Downs Project (WAWD) funded by the Biffa Award Landfill tax. Additional funding (amendments) were organised with NE and the landowners through HLS agreements as well as additional contributions from the landowners.

The outcome

Each partner took a lead role in managing the site projects as well as continuing management on the core SSSIs (Site of Special Scientific Interest) and SINC (Site of Importance for Nature Conservation) sites. The management includes scrub management, water supply installation, fencing installation, wild flower establishment, completing wildlife and baseline surveys, and initiating grazing regimes.

Nine of the projects received funding from the NIA and WAWD projects to complete this management, 14 sites had the South Downs Volunteer Ranger Service volunteers completing chalk downland management (393 volunteer days), and with 5 receiving appropriate chalk grassland management advice only and one site gained funding from another funding stream.

For example, on an estate the core SINC site continued to receive the regular scrub management through volunteer tasks, with restoration taking place on the estate's 44 ha adjoining arable reversion fields, (the largest single South Downs NIA restoration). This included wild flower establishment, with the estate assisting with ground preparation for seed broadcasting, and fencing and water supply installation so a regular grazing regime could be set up. To promote the work completed and demonstrate good practice, two site visits to this estate have taken place, firstly with the Danish Government who were very interested in landscape scale wildlife friendly farming approach and a Landscapes for Life tour for the National AONB Conference.

The scrub management enhanced and increased the chalk grassland habitat and with grazing regimes in place it makes sure that this is then maintained and only selected scrub is allowed to develop, as scrub is an important habitat within the chalk downland habitat providing shelter, nesting and food sources for a variety of wildlife.

The target butterfly species were recorded across the sites, with grizzled skipper and small blue butterfly noted on two of the sites where they had not been previously recorded. The management recommendations for frog orchid and musk orchid is short or cropped grass on chalk soils so with the scrub management completed and grazing regime in place it should provide the right habitat conditions for these and other orchid species.

A major outcome was the engagement and working relationships formed with new landowners including a hobby farmer, golf course, telecommunications company, a water utility company as well as the BC, HCC and HIWWT sites. These engagements were initiated by the aim to join up the chalk grassland sites by creating stepping stone and buffer (adjoining) sites.



South Downs Volunteers completing a baseline chalk grassland survey and a Duke of Burgundy butterfly.

The future

For each site project there is an ongoing maintenance programme, with two of the sites developing bespoke management plans. Volunteer tasks will also continue where required so management on sites will not cease just because the funding has stopped.

The Winchester Focal Area Group will also continue to meet with future projects planned to complete further management on the prioritised and other sites but also to investigate other opportunities, eg. potential sites between the Winchester Focal Area and the next area at Harting.

A landscape scale approach is essential for the future, one way to achieve this is through the new Countryside Stewardship which is supporting Cluster Farms, where a group of landowners is formed to work together to improve the natural environment on a landscape scale.

The ongoing management is key as well as completing baseline surveys so that monitoring can be put in place to confirm that the management is appropriate. This combined with the working relationships with the landowners means these sites will be safeguarding this rare grassland habitat for the future.

Relevant links

NIA Report. http://www.southdowns.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/JOINT_NIAs_BOOKLET.pdf

BC - Monitoring and evaluation of the 'south downs way ahead'.

http://www.hantsiow-butterflies.org.uk /conservation_projects.php

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