



Bedfordshire and Luton Habitat Action Plan: Lowland Dry Acid Grassland

Updated September 2015



Foreword

We are fortunate in Bedfordshire to have a fantastic range of habitats and species within a relatively small geographical area. It is a county of marked contrasts, with the chalk habitats of the North Chilterns, the heathland and acid grassland of the Greensand Ridge and the woodlands and rolling countryside of the Ouse Valley. The fact that species such as adders, dormice and otters are all now expanding their ranges to varying degrees is something we should be proud of and testament to the work of the organisations and individuals involved, but we should not be complacent. There is much to be done, and these Biodiversity Action Plans set out the scale of that challenge very clearly. Only by continuing to work in partnership, putting the case for nature ever more strongly and clearly, can we hope to build on recent progress, bring the natural environment to the fore of the thinking of key decision-makers and reverse long-term declines.

Jon Balaam, Chair of Bedfordshire Local Nature Partnership



Biodiversity Action Plans Overview

The **UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP)** was created in response to a commitment at the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity. It summarises the status of the most threatened habitats and species in the UK and then sets out a series of actions to halt their decline and then reverse it. There are National Action Plans for 1150 species and 65 habitats. The last meeting of the Convention on Biological Diversity took place in Nagoya, Japan during October 2010. During the convention the BAP was replaced by the **Aichi Targets**, which were signed by 192 governments. These 20 Targets aim to halt the loss in biodiversity worldwide by 2020. Within the targets there are a range of challenges, from protecting our best habitats and rarest species, to restoring the services our natural environment provides and tackling climate change. The *UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework* (July 2012) describes how the Aichi Targets will be implemented across the UK and is underpinned by a Biodiversity Strategy for each Country. In England this is *Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services* (August 2011).

Although the Aichi Targets are the focus from the most recent Convention on Biological Diversity, the BAP is still a very valuable reference nationally and locally. It has been used to draw up statutory lists in some of the more recent Acts of Parliament which aim to protect and enhance biodiversity. In 2006 the **Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (NERC)** came into effect. In Section 41 of the Act there is a list of habitats and species which are “*of principal importance for the purpose of conserving biodiversity*”. This lists all the BAP habitats and species which are still regarded as priorities for conservation under the *UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework*. The list includes 56 habitats and 943 species. It was included to assist public bodies with the statutory duty placed on them by Section 40 of the Act. This is often referred to as the ‘Biodiversity Duty’ and states that public bodies have to:

“In exercising their functions, have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity.”

The aim of the Act is to embed nature conservation within all the relevant policies and decisions that public bodies make. Public bodies include a range of organisations from the Borough and Ward Councils to bodies carrying out functions of a public character under a statutory power. There is a Guidance Document that accompanies this Act to assist local authorities to implement the Biodiversity Duty.

Priority species and habitats are also recognised in the **National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)**, which came into effect in early 2012. The NPPF replaced most of the planning guidance which was previously available. It promotes the preservation, restoration and re-creation of priority habitats and ecological networks as well as the protection and recovery of priority species (paragraph 117).

Although the BAP is no longer promoted nationally it is written into legislation and policies which are being currently used. To support this locally, the BAP is still in use to inform and guide many projects and is kept relevant.



Lowland dry acid grassland

National lead organisation(s):
Natural England

County lead organisation(s):
The Greensand Trust
Bedfordshire Heathland Forum

Lowland acid grassland is characterised by a range of grasses and herbs, and in East Anglia the typical community is NVC U1. It is closely related to heathland habitat and often forms integral communities with it.

Current status

National status

Acid grasslands are probably one of the most extensive semi-natural habitats in Britain. Estimates suggest that there are in excess of 1,200,000 ha of acid grassland in the uplands, but only about 30,000 ha in the lowlands. Lowland acid grassland is becoming increasingly scarce in Britain.

It is important to recognise that, whilst occurring as a habitat in its own right, acid grassland frequently occurs as an integral part of a mosaic habitat with lowland heathland, where it can form diverse and distinct communities.

Local status

Acid grasslands occur along the geological outcrop of acidic, mostly sandy soils known as the Greensand Ridge, which is a distinct 'National Character Area' (NCA) as defined by Natural England. These acidic soils are low in nutrients and occur on superficial deposits like sand and gravel. NVC communities U1 and U2 both occur with sub-communities U1b, U1e and U2a. Varied communities of plant, invertebrate and other wildlife species can all occur, and as part of a heathland mosaic habitat it can become even richer in species diversity. The nationally rare proliferous pink *Petrorhagia prolifera* occurs in acid grassland near Potton.

In Bedfordshire, acid grassland is regarded as a rare and threatened resource and the county total has declined from several hundred hectares to approximately 130 ha (0.01%) of the county's land area. The county's acid grassland sites occur in three 'clusters':

- A large number of sites around the Brickhills and Woburn area
- Ampthill and Maulden
- Around Sandy and Gamlingay



On the Chilterns in southern Bedfordshire small areas of acid grassland occur on clay-with-flints which cap the chalk and can be found in conjunction with other calcareous grasslands. The sites remaining either contain, or may have formerly contained, relict acid grassland vegetation. However most of these sites now consist of neutral grassland. The possibility of restoring acidic vegetation can be encouraged by positive management which benefits particular species. Examples include Hudnall Corner County Wildlife Site (CWS), Whipsnade Heath CWS, Stockwood Park CWS, Studham Common CWS and Whipsnade Green.

Current factors affecting acid grassland

- Lack of management is considered to be the chief cause of acid grassland loss and decline. An absence of grazing, cutting, mowing or prescribed burning has resulted in many sites becoming overgrown with scrub, dense stands of bracken or other coarse, aggressive plant species
- Inappropriate management, e.g. tree planting, which can cause the habitat to deteriorate from shading
- Visitor pressure, usually a problem only at sites which have public access and are near large towns where, due to the nature of the habitat, numbers of walkers, particularly dog walkers, can be attracted. Large numbers of visitors with dogs have important implications for site management, as grazing is not a viable proposition for sites with extensive public access as the safety of grazing animals cannot be guaranteed. Sites that are heavily disturbed can become compacted. Where trampling is heavy erosion of the light, sandy soils can occur. Many species are sensitive to disturbance and will stop breeding or existing where pressures become too high. Sites with intensive public access include Rushmere Country Park and Ampthill Park
- Isolation of sites, reducing the opportunity for animals and plants to disperse, particularly the less mobile species. Greensand Ridge acid grassland sites are quite isolated, and there is little chance of colonisation or recolonisation by species from outside the area
- Size of sites; small size of remaining habitat fragments makes the resident species much more susceptible to extinction from accidental fire, habitat changes or population crashes. Human intervention will be needed to reintroduce species that were once present but have been lost.



Current action

Site protection

There are 55 sites with acid grassland habitat, eleven of which are Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). In most cases acid grassland forms only part of the interest of the SSSI. A further 32 sites are designated as CWS.

Management

Four of Bedfordshire's acid grassland sites are managed by Central Bedfordshire Council as Roadside Nature Reserves: Fox Corner, Ampthill Bypass, Warren Wood and Potton Church. At least 29 sites are in private ownership. Some are sensitively managed however others need advice and encouragement/funding to enable landowners to manage the sites.

Achievements since publication of first Action Plan

Since the publication of the 2008 Acid Grassland BAP, significant progress has been made on managing and restoring areas of acid grassland at various locations along the Greensand Ridge, and is likely to exceed the targets set in 2008. This includes continuing the restoration and creation of c.100 ha of heath/acid grassland at Sandy Warren and Sandy Heath Quarry by the RSPB working in partnership with Lafarge-Tarmac; continuing the restoration of c.20 ha of acid grassland at Maulden Heath by the Greensand Trust, with the two SSSI fields brought into favourable condition; and the ongoing creation of c.40 ha of acid and neutral grassland at the Greensand Trust's Sandy Smith Nature Reserve near Clophill. Many of the other existing areas of acid grassland have also been enhanced by appropriate management such as at Rushmere Country Park, Wavendon Heath Meadow, Sandy Pinnacle and Ampthill Park, with grazing restored to part of the latter site as a result of an HLS agreement at the park. The Greensand Heathland Forum has continued to meet annually to discuss heathland and acid grassland management and has visited many of the above sites where management and restoration work is ongoing. On the Chilterns, ongoing management work has enhanced areas of acid grassland at sites such as Studham Common, with heather and heath spotted orchid recently recorded from the Common.



Action plan objectives and targets

Objectives

Maintain and where possible expand the range of acid grassland in Bedfordshire

Maintain and where possible improve the condition of acid grassland in Bedfordshire

Targets

- A. Maintain the 2005 extent (131 ha) and condition of acid grassland in Bedfordshire and Luton
- B. Continue restoration of approx. 180 ha of lowland heathland/acid grassland at Sandy Warren/Sandy Heath Quarry, Sandy Smith Nature Reserve, Maulden Wood/Heath, Copt Hill and Rushmere Country Park
- C. Re-establish by 2020 50 ha of acid grassland from neglected, semi-improved or improved grassland, or arable land.

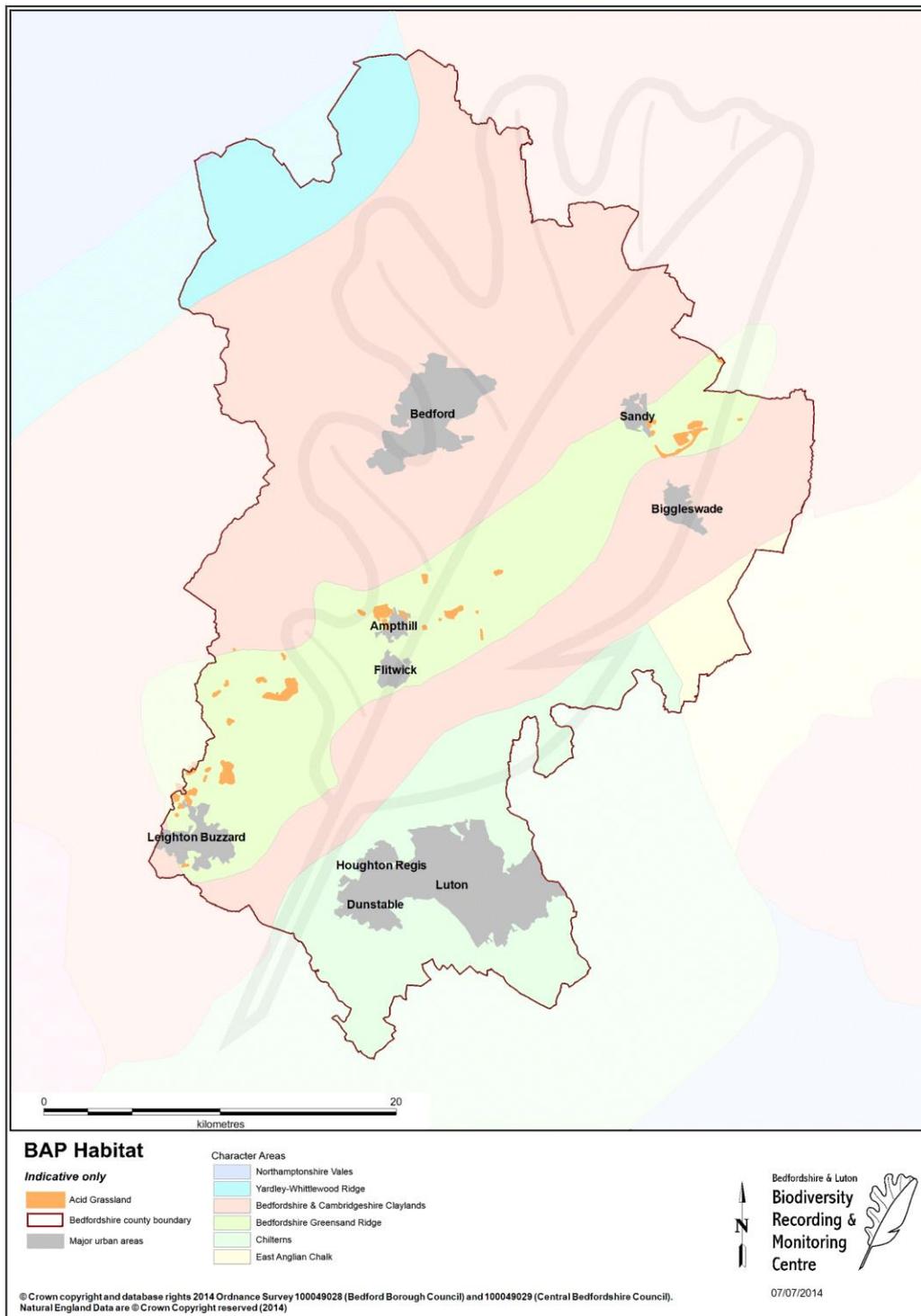


Figure 1: Distribution of lowland acid grassland across Bedfordshire

Proposed action

Partners

Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
Central Bedfordshire Council
Forestry Commission
Natural England

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
The Greensand Trust
Wildlife Trust

Action

Policy and legislation

No local action identified

Site safeguard and management

1. Continue restoration of Readshill Grassland (0.3 ha), Maulden Heath and Grasslands (20 ha) and Rushmere Country Park (14 ha) and Sandy Pinnacle (2 ha) to meet the BAP habitat definition.
2. Maintain or improve the condition of Wavendon Heath Ponds and Meadows (4.9 ha), Grange Meadow Haynes (2 ha), the Ouzel Valley (7 ha) and Double Arches Complex (1 ha), to bring them into favourable condition.
3. Create 40 ha of acid grassland at Sandy Smith Nature Reserve and 5 ha at Copt Hill.
4. Create 100 ha of acid grassland/heathland at The Lodge, Sandy and Sandy Heath Quarry.
5. Achieve favourable condition of Ampthill Bypass RNR, Fox Corner RNR and Warren Wood RNR (0.1 ha).
6. Bring Maulden Church Meadow into favourable condition.
7. Bring the acid grassland at Flitwick Moor (0.3 ha) into favourable condition.
8. Bring land into restoration management regimes where ever practical and where the greatest chance of long term success is evident.
9. Bring all SSSI acid grassland units into favourable or recovering condition by 2015.

Advisory

10. Work closely with Ampthill Town Council to bring Ampthill Park (37.5 ha) into favourable condition by 2030.

11. Continue as resources allow to offer management and/or grant advice to owners of lowland acid grasslands, focusing where possible on designated sites in unfavourable condition including Sandy Cemetery (1.6 ha), Bury Farm, Houghton Conquest (5 ha), Woburn Park (40 ha) and Utcoate Grange Meadow (2.1 ha).

Future research and monitoring

12. Monitor botanical and faunal development of all major acid grassland restoration/creation projects to ensure best practice can be developed and is transferable.

Communication and publicity

13. Seek to stimulate and take advantage of community engagement opportunities as they arise at key sites.



Monitoring the Action Plan

The Heathland Forum will monitor this action plan annually.

Complementary plans

A national action plan exists for lowland acid grassland.

Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire have also written action plans for acid grassland.

This action plan links to other Bedfordshire and Luton habitat action plans, in particular those for lowland heathland, lowland meadow and lowland calcareous grassland.

Acknowledgements

The Greensand Trust has compiled this action plan with assistance from the Bedfordshire Heathland Forum. Members of the Heathland Forum include: Central Bedfordshire Council, Buckinghamshire County Council, Aylesbury Vale District Council, RSPB, Wildlife Trust BCN, Bedfordshire Natural History Society, Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity, Lafarge-Tarmac Ltd, Bedfordshire Reptile and Amphibian Group, Forestry Commission and Natural England.

References

UK BAP Partnership. 2008. National Action Plan – lowland dry acid grassland [ONLINE] http://www.ukbap-reporting.org.uk/plans/national_plan.asp?HAP=%7B698AFFFA%2DDADB%2D41DE%2DA854%2D1456DF8D9DAC%7D. Accessed 28 May 2008.