



Bedfordshire and Luton Habitat Action Plan: Arable Margins

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.



Arable field margins

National lead organisation(s):
Natural England

County lead organisation(s):
Bedfordshire Wildlife Working Group

Arable field margins are strips of land lying between an arable crop and the field boundary, extend for a limited distance into the crop and are deliberately managed to create conditions that benefit key farmland species.

Current status

National status

Approximately 41% of the British landscape is tilled (44% in England), of which cereals alone comprise 51% (Joint Nature Conservation Committee 2006). Much of the wildlife interest in arable areas is now found at the field edges or headlands. Some species that were once considered to be problem weeds are now among Britain's rarest plants.

Local status

There is little known about arable field margins themselves in Bedfordshire but approximately 65% of land in Bedfordshire is classified as arable (79,000 ha). Arable or cereal field margins can support many rare or endangered plant species such as corn parsley, field cow-wheat and shepherd's-needle. Margins can also provide habitats for insects and mammals, and declining bird species such as corn bunting, lapwing and grey partridge.

Current factors affecting arable margins

- Intensification of crop production, including the use of herbicides to ensure a weed-free monoculture, and summer use of insecticides
- Misunderstanding in the farming community about complexity of creating and maintaining arable margins
- Regular recreational (e.g. dog walkers, horse riders) trespassing onto arable margins set aside for wildlife
- The reduction in rotation of cereal crops and other land covers (including grass leys and fallows)

Current action

Management



The Environmental Stewardship Scheme (ESS) replaced the Countryside Stewardship Scheme in 2005. Through its Entry Level (ELS), Higher Level (HLS) and Organic Entry Level Schemes, ESS has delivered much of the national target for field margins and other farmland habitats. In 2016, a new suite of Land Management Schemes will come into force replacing the current Environmental Stewardship Scheme (ESS).

Achievements since publication of first Action Plan

Since the publication of the 2008 Arable margin BAP, the targets set have been exceeded, largely through agri-environment schemes and the work of partnerships like the Campaign for the Farmed Environment (CFE). Statistically:

- 31 ha of cultivated, low input margins were created between 2006 and 2015 exceeding the target of 15ha;
- 161 ha of wild bird seed margins have been created between 2006 and 2015 exceeding the target of 49 ha;
- 104 ha of flower rich field margins providing pollen and nectar sources were created between 2006 and 2015 exceeding the target of 31 ha;
- The amount of permanent grass margins has been expanded from 367 ha to 657 ha, exceeding the target.
- Approximately, 5754 km of hedges are in an ELS/HLS scheme.

In February 2009, the County Wildlife Site (CWS) Panel ratified and adopted new arable margin criteria for CWS selection. This meant that for the first time arable margins could be adopted as CWSs if they met or exceeded the CWS Selection Criteria. As yet, no CWSs have been designated based on these criteria.

Action plan objectives and targets

Objectives

Maintain and where possible expand the length or area of arable field margins in Bedfordshire managed to biodiversity enhancement prescriptions

Maintain and where possible improve the condition of existing arable field margins in Bedfordshire with known populations of key species

Targets

- A. Expand the area of 31 ha of cultivated, low-input field margins by 2020
- B. Expand the area of 161 ha of margins providing wild bird seed by 2020
- C. Expand the area of 104 ha of flower-rich field margins provide a pollen and nectar source by 2020
- D. Maintain and if appropriate expand the area of 657 ha permanent grass margins
- E. Maintain populations of key arable margin species

Proposed action

Partners

Central Bedfordshire Council
Luton Borough Council

BCN Wildlife Trust
Natural England

Bedford Borough Council
Campaign for the Farmed Environment

Action

Policy and legislation

No local action identified

Site safeguard and management

No local action identified

Advisory

1. Conduct for farmers and other landowners at least one seminar/event annually to promote the benefits and encourage uptake of land management schemes and voluntary measure through Campaign for the Farmed Environment for arable margins
2. Conduct a targeted farm visit programme in areas of focus established through action 4 to provide advice and information where needed and encourage appropriate land management scheme option uptake for arable margins
3. Work closely with Natural England to increase positive stewardship in target areas
4. Promote the creation of buffer strips along watercourses

Future research and monitoring

5. Generate information on the distribution of farmland birds, important arable plant areas and/or pollinators as a focus for expanding areas of cultivated, low-input field margins

Communication and publicity

6. Write and submit for publication in trade magazines at least one article annually on arable margin management



Monitoring the Action Plan

This Biodiversity Action Plan will periodically be monitored and reviewed by the Wildlife Working Group of the Local Nature Partnership.

Complementary plans

Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire have also written action plans for arable field margins.

This action plan links to other Bedfordshire and Luton habitat action plans, in particular those for lowland meadows, lowland calcareous grasslands, woodland and hedgerows. The plan also links to several Bedfordshire and Luton species action plans, in particular arable plants and farmland birds.

Acknowledgements

The Wildlife Trust has compiled this action plan with assistance from members of the Campaign for the Farmed Environment (CFE).

References

Joint Nature Conservation Committee. 2006. *UK Biodiversity Action Plan: habitat action plan – cereal field margins*.