

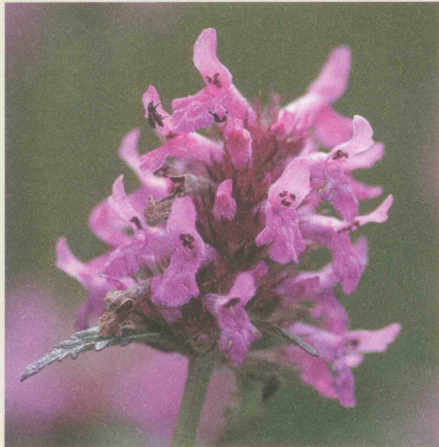


FieldNotes

Durham Biodiversity Partnership

Action for wildlife in Gateshead, South Tyneside, Sunderland, Darlington & County Durham

The Coalfields & Lowlands Project rescuing our last lowland meadows



Betony - a common feature of lowland meadows.
(northeastwildlife.co.uk)

Our agricultural lowlands were once full of wildflower-rich meadows and pastures, the result of centuries of established farming practice. Various orchids were widespread, and adder's tongue fern was common on unploughed pasture. Today, species-rich lowland meadow and pasture are an extremely rare and fragmented habitat.

By 1984 we had lost 97% of this habitat, and losses continued in the 1990s, in many counties at rates up to 10% per annum. In Durham there is no comprehensive picture, but anecdotal evidence suggests those losses continue today.

In the past, grazed pasture has been ploughed up and reseeded with agricultural grasses. Other sites have been damaged by regular application of fertilisers or slurried manure, which leads to rapid species loss. In Durham today, many remaining sites are being lost through sheer neglect as scrub is allowed to take over, and sensitive wildflowers disappear.

Today we face two enormous challenges. Firstly we need to hang on to the last remaining fragments of this beautiful and valuable resource, and secondly we need to start the process of restoration as part of a more extensive and sustainable agricultural environment.

Both these challenges are being met by a new project developed by the Durham

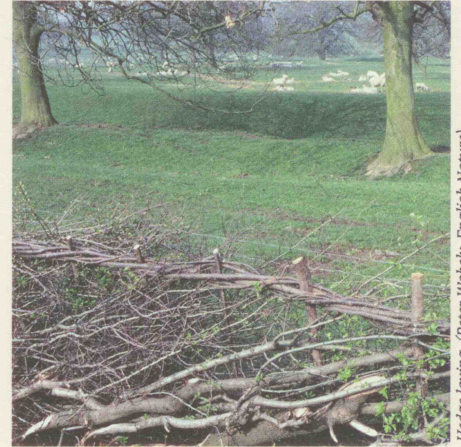
Biodiversity Partnership. The Coalfields and Lowlands project involves partners in Gateshead, Darlington, Sunderland, South Tyneside, Wear Valley, Derwentside, Sedgefield and the City of Durham and is being managed by the Durham Wildlife Trust. Initially funded for two years by Natural England's Countdown 2010 fund and SITA's Enriching Nature Fund, the project will save a number of currently neglected sites by providing fencing and water to allow grazing, and will be starting to restore a number of other sites through reseeding.

As well as the practical work on sites, a new project officer will resurvey important sites with nature conservation designations, and talk to landowners about their management, as well as co-ordinating further survey work on all sites to help us build a better picture of this threatened wildlife resource.

This project mirrors the highly successful work of the MAGical Meadows project, which was based in the Durham Magnesian Limestone Natural Area. The Coalfields and Lowlands project will work next door, in the Northumbrian Coal Measures and the Tees Lowlands Natural Areas. However, one thing remains exactly the same: The MAGical Meadows project officer, Michelle Appleby, has jumped ship and is now the new Coalfields and Lowlands project officer! We wish her all the best. □



Water avens - found in damper areas of lowland meadows.
(northeastwildlife.co.uk)



Hedgerow laying. (Peter Wathey, English Nature)

Hedgerow Survey

The Durham Biodiversity Partnership is undertaking the first area-wide survey of hedgerows in Durham since the work of Bailey in 1979. A grant from DEFRA and staff support from Durham County Council means that we should be able to build a good picture of the state of the Hedgerow resource from Gateshead to Darlington.

The survey is based on the methodology in Natural England's Hedgerow Survey Handbook, and involves sampling hedgerows across the whole of the Durham BAP area for detailed survey, and using aerial photos for an estimate of the overall length of hedgerow.

The detailed survey will measure simple things such as height, width and continuity of hedges and the numbers of hedgerow trees, as an approximate measure of their value for wildlife. Surveyors will also record data for woody species and ground flora.

All of this information will be used to help assess whether we are reaching our targets in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. It will also be used as a baseline in Durham to help set more useful targets in the revised Durham BAP.

Competition

The Ninth County Durham Hedgelaying and Drystone Walling Competition is to be held this year at Cold Pike Farm near Lanchester on Saturday 4th of November. Potential competitors should contact Sue Zissler at Tyne Tees FWAG for an entry form (01833 696634). Closing date 16th October.