

Parish Grasslands Project

Issue 9

November 2004

DATE FOR YOUR DIARY

**TUESDAY
23RD NOVEMBER
AGM
AT THE
MACKENZIE HALL
7.30PM**

**FOLLOWED BY AN
ILLUSTRATED TALK
BY ANDY PURCELL,
WILDLIFE
PHOTOGRAPHER**

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Yellow-rattle: an aid to flower-rich grassland

Yellow-rattle is widespread herb, familiar as a bright yellow flower with a snapdragon-like shape, which forms masses of pale capsules full of black seeds that rustle gently as one walks past them. Conservationists view it with approval because it usually grows in herb-rich fields, which means it is taken as a sign of 'good' grassland. Farmers, on the other hand, have regarded it as a harmful weed, for the good reason that it is semi-parasitic on grasses, clovers and other herbs, and can suppress the productivity of grassland by up to 50%. It is scattered throughout the Common - in recent years I have seen it in at least 50 fields - but it seems to avoid strongly acid, i.e. the most heathy soils.

Earlier this year a specialist ecological journal included two articles on the biology, ecology and management of yellow-rattle, so I am now in possession of more facts about this species than I know what to do with. I discover that it grows throughout Europe and North America, and also in Iceland and southern Greenland, so it's hardly endangered. It's also been part of the British flora for at least 50,000 years.

Its lifestyle is that of a summer annual that inhabits a wide variety of grasslands, particularly hay meadows. Seeds germinate in February and March, and seedlings quickly attach themselves to the roots of neighbouring plants, from which they suck water and plant nutrients. Flowers open in May and, after pollination, rapidly develop into pale capsules. Seeds are shed in high summer, and they would naturally fall within a metre of the source, but wind, cattle and hay-making disperse them up to 19 metres. They then sit dormant in the topsoil for 7 months, but they all germinate next spring: there is no 'carry over' of seeds to later years.

Ideally for yellow-rattle, fields should be cut late for hay, then grazed by cattle. If a field is grazed in spring, all plants are eaten, no seed is set, and the plant immediately vanishes from that field, which is why fields that are grazed through spring and early summer have no yellow-rattle. If a field is shut up for hay, enough seed is set before cutting to keep the

species going for another year. Cattle tend to open up the sward better than other stock, thereby producing good germination sites next spring, but hayfields that are aftermath-grazed by sheep, or not grazed at all, seem to keep their yellow-rattles well enough. Yellow-rattle also benefits if the ground is scarified early in spring.

Some field owners on the Common have introduced yellow-rattle. Experiments



carried out elsewhere confirm our experience that it's easy to establish a few plants just by throwing seed around. Initially, only a few plants will appear, but with suitable management they can spread rapidly and become abundant within a few years. If your aim is wild flowers, this is a good move, for, once the yellow-rattle is well established, it will reduce the growth of grasses and thereby allow other flowers to become more abundant. It also reduces competition generally, so any other species you try to introduce will also stand a better chance of surviving.

So, if you are using 'green hay' to diversify the flowers in your fields, or if you just want the flowers you have already to be more abundant, there is much to be said for treating your field as a meadow (i.e., cutting hay), arranging for cattle grazing later in the summer, and introducing yellow-rattle.

George Peterken

FARMER, LANDOWNER, GRAZIER, LAND MANAGER? ARE YOU REGISTERED? IS ALL YOUR LAND ON THE RURAL LAND REGISTRY?

IF YOU WANT TO CLAIM SINGLE FARM PAYMENT (SFP) OR JOIN THE NEW ENTRY LEVEL OR HIGHER LEVEL ENVIRONMENTAL SCHEMES (ES), THE LAND WILL NEED TO BE MAPPED ON THE RURAL LAND REGISTER (RLR). The majority of farmland will have been registered on the RLR. However there are circumstances when this will not have happened.

If you are not in Stewardship or claiming agricultural subsidies:

Contact the RPA's Customer Service Centre in Newcastle and register your interest in registering the land. You will be asked to provide your name, address and CPH (county parish holding) number. If you don't have a CPH number one will be provided.

If you are in Stewardship already but have not claimed any agricultural subsidies:

Land under existing ERDP agreements, this includes Countryside Stewardship, is being digitised and you need to take no action to register these specific fields. However if you have additional agricultural land or non-agricultural land that is eligible for ES then you will need to register this. Again contact the RPA's Newcastle office to record an expression of interest.

If you have claimed agricultural subsidies but are not in stewardship:

If you have unregistered land on the holding that you wish to register then the following procedure should be followed. Contact your local RPA office – IACS Section and request form IACS22. This must then be completed as soon as possible and returned to the RPA. South West RPA: 0845 6056516

You are currently both an IACS and a Stewardship claimant.

Again land under the Stewardship agreement is being digitised and you need take no action to register this land. However if you have unregistered agricultural or non-agricultural land you wish to add to a future ES application, you should obtain form IACS22 from the RPA. South West RPA: 0845 6056516

There are three other related issues to be aware of:

Land on the register/RLR requires a boundary: Some land, eligible for ES, will not have a tangible boundary. In this case, when registering this land you will be required to define the extent of the area and provide a boundary. Provide an honest estimate, one that can be defended. This virtual boundary can be checked during the progress of the agreement.

Common Land: All registered Commons will be on the RLR and individual commoners/graziers do not need to take any action. However land on unregistered Commons will need to be included on the RLR and so graziers/commoners should contact the RPA - IACS Section.

The England Woodland Grant Scheme: All land to be entered into this scheme will require registration on the RLR.

*The contact details for the RPA's Customer Service Centre in Newcastle are: Customer Service Centre, Rural Payments Agency, Lancaster House, Hampshire Court, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE4 7YH. Phone: 0845 6018045
Email: Customer.Service.Centre@rpa.gsi.gov.uk*

Green Hay News

Three members of the PGP have used green hay obtained from Liz Rush's flower rich meadows on Brockweir Common. The hay was cut and spread on the same day on three very different sites. The first was on a well drained field that had recently been cleared of bracken and bramble and was largely free of grasses with considerable patches of bare ground. The second was spread on a well drained field with an established sward and afterwards was grazed by cattle. The third area had been

completely cleared of vegetation and so was bare ground. This site is adjacent to a stream and has a relatively high water table. Some germination of grasses is already evident in sites 1 and 3. We will only be able to judge how effective this has been when full germination takes place in the Spring, but it may well take 2 or 3 years before we know whether the flowers and particularly the orchids have become established. I will report again in the spring. If

any other members wish to try this technique out next year, please let me know on the machinery hire forms. Jaye Simpson will be writing a "How to Guide" on green hay for those who are interested.

Peter Chard

Rare Breeds (part 2)

Since we now have seven Gloucester cows and a very amorous Gloucester bull living in Hewelsfield, let me tell a little about the breed and their rescue from the edge of extinction.

For those who may not have seen Gloucester Cattle, let me elucidate. They are a rich mahogany colour running to a black head with fine horns, wide and inclined to turn up, with black tips. Although of course the most striking feature is the completely white tail and belly.

Gloucester Cattle can be traced back to the Severn Vale as early as the 13th Century and by 1500 the City of Gloucester had a thriving cattle market as well as a cheese and butter fair. Demand for Gloucester Cheese (now famed as Single and Double Gloucester Cheese) continued to increase until well into the 18th Century.

It was in Berkeley, Gloucestershire, in 1796 that Dr. Edward Jenner, who for 20 years had studied smallpox, found that a Gloucester cow called Blossom gave the disease Cowpox (a mild form of Smallpox) to Sarah Nelmes, a Dairy Maid. By transferring serum from Sarah's arm to that of an eight year old

boy called James Phipps the smallpox vaccine was born! Dr. Jenner became internationally famous. Blossom the



cow lived out her life in Berkeley and later her hide was kept by Dr. Jenner, hung in his Coach House. In 1857 the hide was presented to St. George's Hospital, London where Dr. Jenner had studied.

In the 18th Century Gloucester Cattle declined, being replaced by improved Longhorns and then the Shorthorn. By 1930 only 142 remained in just four herds. At a sale at Wick Court, Arlingham in 1972 there was the dispersal of the last remaining herd

of Gloucester Cattle but, against all odds, a few dedicated breeders formed a new breed society and saved just 58 cattle from extinction. Today there are approximately 700 females, interestingly, mostly in Gloucestershire.

It is said that the richness of the milk and the small size of the fat globules make it ideal for cheese making. Our county has at least two farms producing Single and Double Gloucester Cheese – Charles Martell of Dymock and Jonathan Crump at Arlingham.

The meat, known as 'Old Gloucester Beef', is also recognised for its flavour and succulence – due to the fat marbling.

Gloucesters are the oldest English breed, they are not only dual purpose but being very docile they are also well suited as draft animals. So with the ever escalating price of fuel – drive well to the left!

John Childs

Machinery Report

The PGP now owns a 70 horsepower Vithnar four wheel drive articulated tractor which has front and rear power take off, and can be driven in either direction by changing the position of the driving seat. It is a very versatile vehicle and can manoeuvre through narrow gates and tackle very steep slopes. Its top speed on the road is 26mph and so can drive on the narrow lanes as quickly as a car. Together with the other pieces of equipment it is kept at Cowhill Farm and operated very efficiently by John Childs.

The little blue tractor is no longer as neat and pristine as it was when we acquired it in June. It shows distinct signs of all the hours of work it has carried out. When I asked members for an initial idea of how much use it would get, as part of our bid to the Heritage Lottery, I clearly underestimated the need. In the first six months of use by members we have exceeded our target for the first two years! There is no doubt that the machinery has proved its worth and so far most of our members seem satisfied with its performance. The front mounted flail has been most in demand to tackle

fields that are overgrown with bramble and bracken and often scrub. It can cope with scrub growth of 2 to 3 inch diameter, but anything larger must be cut to the ground with a chainsaw before we can use the flail. Frequently John Childs has tackled fields with growth of 6 feet or over and mown through successfully. The flail reduces the bramble, bracken and shoots to small pieces that rapidly decay and leave a relatively smooth surface. Of course there will be regrowth and fields will need to be cut a second if not a third time to reduce the bracken. The tractor is remarkably speedy and cutting takes much less time than we originally estimated which reduces costs significantly. This does vary of course, depending on the steepness and shape of the field. Because the tractor is articulated, it can be manoeuvred around large trees and into tight corners very easily.

We had difficulty in getting the specialised hay making equipment delivered on time and as a result could not start haymaking until August. We owe sincere apologies to all those members who asked for hay to be cut and

then watched the short spell of fine weather vanish before we came. We owe special apologies to Sally Secrett and Maggie Biss whose meadows were cut as soon as the mower appeared; and then it rained and rained and rained! Sadly both hay crops were lost.

The front mounted mower exceeded our expectations. It folds up into a small unit which can be easily brought into the field, extended to 10 feet and used at remarkable speed. On one trip it took 1 hour to reach the field and 1 hour to return and 9 minutes to cut $\frac{3}{4}$ of an acre. Mowing certainly is a swift and low cost activity. However, turning, baling and wrapping takes a lot longer and there is need for more than one person to give assistance, so if you are prepared and able to help please let us know when you book the equipment for hay making next year. The baler gave some initial problems but once those were solved with John's skill and efficiency, it worked very well. The small round bales can be very easily rolled and stood on end and stored. The bales are wrapped in a plastic film which helps to keep the hay in good condition.

We did learn some valuable lessons from which we hope to benefit next year. Firstly this machinery is most effective in fields that have difficult access and are relatively small. We would recommend members to use contractors with larger machinery for hay making in fields over 2 acres in size. We will give you contact numbers for contractors in the Spring newsletter. We also found fields that had not been cut for hay previously had bracken and bramble close to the hedges making the



hay useless. We recommend that members check their fields and if bracken and bramble are present, ask us to use the flail around the edges and only make hay from the weed free grass in the centre. We would also remind members that ragwort is poisonous and must be removed by hand before hay is made. Where fields are shaded with tall trees or overgrowing hedges the sun cannot get to the hay close to the hedge and it does not dry sufficiently. Where this occurs there is waste, and we

can bale it and leave you to dispose of the bales. The remainder of the field will make perfectly good hay. We did try out haylage in a few cases with good results, but it can only be made from good quality grass, so if you want us to make haylage we will pay you an advance visit to ensure that this is possible. When fields are cut for the first time the grass is often coarse and rank and makes poor quality hay. After cutting for several years the quality should improve. The best hay is made from meadows of sweet vernal grass. Continued cutting for



hay will reduce soil fertility and result in the appearance of more flowers. Next year we shall ask you to let us know if you wish to retain the hay for your own use, or whether you wish us to remove and store it.

The haymaking is heavily dependant on weather and we cannot provide a timetable to let you know when we shall arrive to carry out the work. All we can do is hope that next summer produces better weather than this year!

During the autumn, winter and spring months we shall be carrying out work with the flail clearing overgrown meadows. If you have neighbours with small pieces of land that are overgrown please tell them about the benefits of using our machinery and encourage them to join the PGP. It is a condition of the grant that the machinery is only used to assist members to manage their meadows. We hope that over a period of time we shall increase the number of good quality flower meadows on the Common.

If you need work carried out please complete the form enclosed or ring me on 01594 530513

Peter Chard

The aim of this Project is to conserve and enhance the landscape of the parishes of St Briavels, Hewelsfield & Brockweir by maintaining and managing the semi-natural grasslands and associated features.