

# Wales Grassland and Heathland Ecosystem Group Priority Action

## Monmouthshire Grasslands

### Habitat summary

No habitat has suffered more from the agricultural intensification of the past few decades than unimproved neutral grassland. The habitat remains very vulnerable to land improvement and recent evidence suggests that sites are still being lost (Stevens et al, 2010).

*Cynosurus cristatus* - *Centaurea nigra* grassland (MG5), the main unimproved grassland of dry neutral soils in Britain, is still widespread in Wales, but only about 1,500 ha remain compared to over 1 million ha of improved grassland. Although stands of MG5 are often small and fragmentary, a few concentrations remain. MG5 is the core community for the BAP priority habitat **Lowland meadows**.

MG5 supports a range of uncommon vascular plants and is an important community for certain invertebrates, particularly bumblebees, largely due to the variety and abundance of nectar-rich flowers in the community. Hornet robber-fly is also mostly associated with MG5 sites in Wales. Some MG5 sites are important for waxcaps and other grassland fungi.

### Gwent neutral grassland summary

The eastern part of Gwent, particular the area south of Monmouth (including the Trellech Plateaux), supports a particularly large concentration of MG5. Although thinning out somewhat further south, pockets of the habitat occur down as far as the Gwent Levels. The Levels themselves are important for shrill carder bee (*Bombus sylvarum*), one of Britain's rarest bumblebees, restricted to just six locations in the UK, of which Monmouthshire/the Gwent Levels is one of three in Wales. On the levels the bee is mainly associated with the species-rich ditch flora, but is also sometimes seen in flower-rich grassland north of the M4/48 corridors. The project area also supports important populations of hornet robber-fly (*Asilus crabroniformis*) - including at Brockwells Meadows SSSI.

The project is intended to maintain, restore and expand areas of MG5 in Gwent, bolstering current distribution and aid spread of shrill carder bee and hornet robber-fly by providing more robust conservation sites and improving ecological connectivity between sites.

Considerable work cataloguing and assessing MG5 sites additional to those recorded by the CCW Lowland Grassland Survey in Gwent has been undertaken by the Gwent Wildlife Trust and Monmouthshire Meadows Group.

A valuable 12-year research project investigating fertiliser treatments to an unimproved hay meadow and restoration of a semi-improved grassland has taken place at Pentwyn Farm. A large-scale grassland restoration/creation project is underway at Gwent Wildlife Trust land at Wyeswood Common, adjacent to Pentwyn Farm.

BAP area: Gwent RAG.

### Action required.

- Maintain or re-establish appropriate very low-input hay and/or pasture management on MG5 sites, ideally with cattle or horse grazing.
- Improve ecological connectivity through restoration or re-creation of sites in core areas, focussing on and around high-quality MG5 sites (SSSI/pSSSI) and to benefit S42 species.

- Maintain and develop databases of sites and any newly discovered examples. Build on work by CCW Phase 2 Lowland Grassland Survey, Gwent Wildlife Trust and Monmouthshire Meadows Group.
- Assess conservation value of unsurveyed or partially surveyed sites where necessary.

### **Key MG5 conservation sites in the project area**

Brockwells Meadows SSSI  
 RAF Caerwent (including Dinham Meadows SSSI)  
 Lower Nex Meadows, Devauden SSSI  
 Plantation Farm and the Gethley SSSI  
 Upper Maerdy Farm  
 Springdale  
 New Grove Farm  
 Pentwyn Farm Grasslands, Penallt SSSI  
 Woodbine Cottage  
 Barbadoes Hill Meadows SSSI  
 Cobbler's Plain Meadows, Devaud SSSI  
 Gwent Levels Pasture (SSSI)

Action on SSSI should be discussed and agreed with local CCW staff.

### **Species Interest**

#### ***Key Section 42 species***

Shrill Carder-bee	<i>Bombus sylvarum</i>
Hornet Robber-fly	<i>Asilus crabroniformis</i>

#### ***Other Section 42 species***

The project has potential to benefit a range of other S42 fauna, including:

Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Adder	<i>Vipera berus</i>
Slow worm	<i>Anguis fragilis</i>
Brown hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>
Brown-banded carder-bee	<i>Bombus humilis</i>

Bat species and various other invertebrates.

#### ***Other notable plant species***

Meadow thistle	<i>Cirsium dissectum</i>
Dyer's greenweed	<i>Genista tinctoria</i>
Southern marsh-orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza praetermissa</i>
Green-winged orchid	<i>Orchis morio</i>
Greater butterfly-orchid	<i>Platanthera chlorantha</i>
Large thyme	<i>Thymus pulegioides</i>
Dwarf thistle	<i>Cirsium acaule</i>
Autumn lady's tresses	<i>Spiranthes spiralis</i>
Pepper saxifrage	<i>Silaum silaus</i>
Adder's-tongue fern	<i>Ophioglossum vulgatum</i>
Greater Meadow-rue	<i>Thalictrum flavum</i>

Smooth brome  
Meadow brome

*Bromus racemosus*  
*Bromus commutatus*

## **Reference**

Stevens, D. P., Smith, S. L. N., Blackstock, T. H., Bosanquet, S. D. S., Stevens, J. P. 2010. *Grasslands of Wales. A survey of lowland species-rich grasslands, 1987–2004*. University of Wales Press, Cardiff.