

Case Study

Chalk Grassland Restoration Winchester Focal Area

Background

Ancient chalk grassland, the species-rich turf that grows on top of chalk, is said to be Europe's equivalent of tropical rainforest.

This grassland has existed for thousands of years and is one of the richest habitats in Europe. The variety of grassland found in the South Downs is especially wildlife-rich; it supports as many as 40 plant species per square metre, as well as many rare insects, molluscs and birds.

Half of the world's chalk grassland is located in the UK, with 16.5% (of approx. 40,000 ha) in the South Downs.

But the grasslands are under continuing threat; an estimated 80% have been destroyed in the past 60 years, either due to agricultural improvements, treatment with chemical fertilisers, re-seeding with fast growing grasses, or ploughing up and replacing with arable crops.

In 2012 in the Western Downs the Winchester Focal Area Group was formed to plan, organise and carry out chalk grassland restoration, which is vital to;

- the survival of rare and endangered wildlife
- the provision of clean drinking water
- the availability of valuable green open space for recreation.

The project received funding from the South Downs Way Ahead, Nature Improvement Area (NIA) scheme, a project lead by the South Downs National Park Authority in partnership with 28 organisations.



The project

The Winchester Focal Area Group is chaired by the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust and the core membership is made up of Butterfly Conservation, Hampshire County Council, Winchester City Council, Natural England and the SDNPA.

The group prioritised 23 restoration projects (of 53 proposed), to complete within the 3 years of the NIA scheme (2012–15), aiming to restore a collective total of 268ha of chalk downland habitat.

Each partner took a lead role in managing the projects. The management involved the undertaking of a range of activities including;

- scrub management
- water supply installation
- fencing installation
- wild flower establishment
- completing wildlife and baseline surveys
- initiating grazing regimes.

There are six chalk grassland target species which are Biodiversity Action Plan priority species, namely; small blue; Duke of Burgundy; grizzled skipper; dingy skipper; frog orchid; and the musk orchid. Careful consideration was given to make sure that any management took account of their requirements.

Nine of the projects received funding from the NIA and extra funding was applied for and granted (Biffa Award Landfill tax) to complete the two year Wild About Winchester Downs Project. Additional funding was organised with Natural England and the landowners through HLS agreements as well as additional contributions from the landowners.

“For more than 40 years I have had the privilege of working on nature-conservation issues in the UK... Never in all that time have I seen the sort of creativity, partnership working and sheer enthusiasm that the NIA competition has released in consortia that want to deliver more effective conservation for England’s wonderful wildlife in their area.”

Professor Sir John Lawton, 2012

The outcome

The chalk grassland restoration programme in the Winchester Focal Area has been a great success. 268 ha of chalk downland has been restored and target species noted on sites where they had previously not been recorded. Partners worked well together to achieve their common goals and volunteers put in a herculean effort on the ground. The project stands for excellent value for money, detailed outcomes include;

Habitat management. The scrub management enhanced and increased the chalk grassland habitat, which will be maintained by grazing regimes.

Biodiversity. The target butterfly species were recorded across the sites, with the grizzled skipper and the small blue butterfly noted on two of the sites where they had not been previously recorded.

Community Engagement. The South Downs Volunteer Ranger Service completed chalk downland management on 14 of the sites, totaling a magnificent 393 volunteer days.

Partnership working. Significant new working relationships were formed with new landowners including a hobby farmer, a golf course, a telecommunications company and a water utility company.

Sharing best practice. Two showcase visits have taken place to the largest single South Downs NIA chalk grassland restoration site, which is located in one of the estates in the focal area; one visit with the Danish Government who were very interested in landscape scale wildlife friendly farming approach and the other a Landscapes for Life tour for the National AONB Conference.

The future

Each site has an ongoing maintenance programme; volunteer tasks will continue where required sustaining the changes already made. On-going monitoring, including the use of baseline surveys, will be carried out, gathering data that will indicate the success level of the management techniques adopted.

The Winchester Focal Area Group will continue to meet to provide a coordinated approach to grassland restoration and management and will also look to investigate other potential new sites e.g. between the Focal Area and the next area at Harting.

A landscape scale approach is essential for the future and one way to achieve this is through the new Countryside Stewardship which is supporting Cluster Farms, where a group of landowners is formed to work together to improve the natural environment on a landscape scale. SDNPA Officers are liaising with farmers in the area to explore this opportunity.

Active grassland management combined with collaborative partnership working means that these environmentally important sites will be safeguarded long into the future.

Relevant links

NIA Report

www.southdowns.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/JOINT_NIAs_BOOKLET.pdf

BC - Monitoring and evaluation of the 'south downs way ahead'.

www.hantsiow-butterflies.org.uk/conservation_projects.php

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September 2015



Volunteers completing a grassland survey