Improved grassland

WHAT IS IMPROVED GRASSLAND ?

Improved grassland is a habitat of limited biodiversity interest, the dominant species are usually rye-grass and white clover. The habitat is formed and maintained by intensive intervention including ploughing and re-seeding, increased drainage and fertiliser application. The resulting grass sward is uniform in composition and texture and supports few other species.

On most agricultural grassland the trend has moved away from traditional hay making to silage production, where the grass is cut at an earlier stage in the season to provide a fodder with a higher feed value. In addition, silage production is less weather dependant and less labour intensive. Storing the grass as silage rather than hay provides the winter food supply largely for dairy cattle industry although other livestock may be fed from it or graze upon improved grassland. Improved grassland can also be found on arable-beef/sheep farms where it is used as an arable break crop.

WHERE IS IT FOUND IN THE UK?

Improved grassland is found throughout the UK with concentrations in the south and west, where the dairy industry is strongest.

WHY IS IMPROVED GRASSLAND OF CONSERVATION IMPORTANCE?

Improved grassland is an important habitat because of the total area of land it covers. In the past 50 years it has increased by approximately 90% in area nationally. Whilst currently of little conservation value there are management methods which can improve its biodiversity. In some areas it can be of importance for waterfowl.

IMPROVED GRASSLAND IN THE DURHAM AREA ?

WHAT IS THE STATE OF IMPROVED GRASSLAND IN THE DURHAM AREA?

There has been an increase in the area of semi-improved and improved grassland in Durham, although the rate of increase has decreased over the last twenty years. It is the most abundant habitat in County Durham, covering over 29% of the area, i.e. almost 72,000 ha.

WHERE DOES IT OCCUR IN THE DURHAM AREA ?

Improved grassland occurs throughout the Plan area, with the largest concentration in the central area and smaller clusters in the east. It is much more scarce in the upland areas of the west.

THE BIODIVERSITY OF IMPROVED GRASSLANDS IS AT RISK FROM:

Intensification of management, including increased cutting, fertiliser and herbicide use.

Decrease in management of boundary features and semi-natural areas e.g. hedges, hedgebanks and trees.

Increased drainage.

THE BIODIVERSITY OF IMPROVED GRASSLAND BENEFITS FROM:

Extensification of management, including decreases in the use of fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides.

Positive management for associated hedgerows, hedge banks and trees.

Use of less intensively managed grass margins and buffer strips.

IMPORTANT SPECIES FOR IMPROVED GRASSLAND:

Brown hare	**	***Grey partridge***	**
Skylark	**	***Barn owl***	**
Lapwing	*	***Waterfowl e.g. geese, wigeon***	
Snipe			
Redshank			

OTHER HABITAT ACTION PLANS COVERING ISSUES RELEVANT TO IMPROVED GRASSLANDS:

Arable land	*
Hedgerows	**

*N.B. ** indicates action plan produced in 1998.*
** indicates action plan produced in 2000.*

TARGETS FOR THE CONSERVATION OF THE BIODIVERSITY OF IMPROVED GRASSLANDS IN THE DURHAM AREA:

		Date
Target 1	***Enhance the existing biodiversity interest of improved grasslands and associated habitats.***	***ONGOING***
Target 2	***Decrease the amount of intensively managed improved grassland in the Durham area, to the benefit of biodiversity by 1% by 2008 and by a total of 2% by 2012.***	***2008 2012***
Target 3	***Convert 5% existing improved grassland to more biodiversity valuable semi-natural habitats, for example, extensive grasslands, scrub, woodlands or wetlands.***	***2015***

Improved grasslands

IMPROVED GRASSLAND ACTIONS			
ACTION	DATE	POSSIBLE PARTNERS	MEETS TARGET NO.
POLICY AND LEGISLATION			
1. Seek opportunities to include improved grassland in agri-environment schemes.	2002	MAFF, EN, RSPB, FWAG	1, 2, 3
2. Seek opportunities to extend the organic aid schemes to reduce artificial inputs to improved grassland.	2004	MAFF, DBAP, FWAG	1, 2, 3
SITE SAFEGUARD AND MANAGEMENT			
3. Identify demonstration sites as examples of best practice; sympathetic management is likely to benefit lapwing and hares.	2004	DBAP, MAFF, FWAG, RSPB, ABAG	1, 2
RESEARCH AND MONITORING			
4. Assess current biodiversity value of improved grasslands.	2004	DBAP, MAFF, EN, RSPB, FWAG	1
5. Develop a 3-year monitoring programme for indicator species such as brown hare, lapwing and skylark.	2004	DBAP, EN, RSPB, MAFF, DBC	1
ADVISORY			
6. Set up Agricultural and Biodiversity Advisory Group.	2000	FWAG, DBAP, ABAG, NFU, CLA	1
7. Produce guidelines for wildlife friendly management of improved grasslands.	2004	DBAP, FWAG, LAs, RSPB, ABAG	1
8. Set up small scale grants scheme to encourage farm biodiversity projects.	2004	FWAG, DBAP, LAs, ABAG, CDHP	2, 3
COMMUNICATION AND PUBLICITY			
9. Raise awareness of importance of extensively managed grasslands.	ONGOING	DBAP, FWAG, LAs, RSPB, CA	1