

Meadows under threat

Despite conservation efforts, much of the remaining hay meadows continue to decline and it is crucial that every opportunity to save the remaining fragments of good quality habitat is seized. The estimated extent of species-rich neutral grassland surviving today in the UK is less than 15,000ha following a vast and alarming decline over the last few decades.

Traditionally, hay meadows are grazed by cattle or sheep from the autumn through to early spring, before being 'shut-up' to allow the hay crop to grow. Hay is cut in July or August, but in some cases as late as September. The livestock are then returned to the field to graze the aftermath (vegetation that re-grows following cutting).

The main cause of hay meadow decline is due to changes in farming practises. The majority of meadows are turned into species-poor grasslands through drainage, ploughing and re-seeding and the application of fertilisers and herbicides. Many of these fields are used to grow grass for silage crops as cattle fodder and are generally managed commercially for cattle and sheep production. The meadows are cut much earlier in the season, before flowers have had chance to set seed and destroying any breeding attempt by ground-nesting birds, such as curlews and skylarks. Most wild flowers are lost rapidly, and in turn the invertebrates and birds which rely on them also disappear.



If you own land and would like advice on managing it for wildlife, please get in touch with Yorkshire Wildlife Trust.

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Species-rich hay meadows



Why are hay meadows important?

Species-rich hay meadows are a rare and declining habitat across England. Most remnants are less than two hectares in extent (about the size of two football fields) and are often isolated. Patches also occur along river banks, road verges, and in woodland clearings.

Species-rich hay meadows support a high diversity of plants. In the uplands they may also contain more threatened species such as northern hawk's-beard, small white orchid and various species of rare lady's mantle. They provide nesting and feeding sites for wading birds such as nationally declining curlew and small birds such as yellow wagtails and twite. They are also important as feeding areas for invertebrates and bats.

The most striking feature of this habitat is the variety and abundance of wild flowers, including wood crane's-bill, pignut, great burnet and lady's mantle, in addition to numerous grass species



Wood crane's-bill
Geranium sylvaticum

Pollinated by bees, flies, moths and butterflies that are guided by tramlines along the petals that lead to the pollen.

Sweet vernal grass
Anthoxanthum odoratum

When dried it has a characteristic sweet smell of fresh hay. This is due to the presence of coumarins, which also have anticoagulant properties.



Great burnet
Sanguisorba officinalis

The purple, raspberry-like flowers are a good indicator of late cut hay meadows.

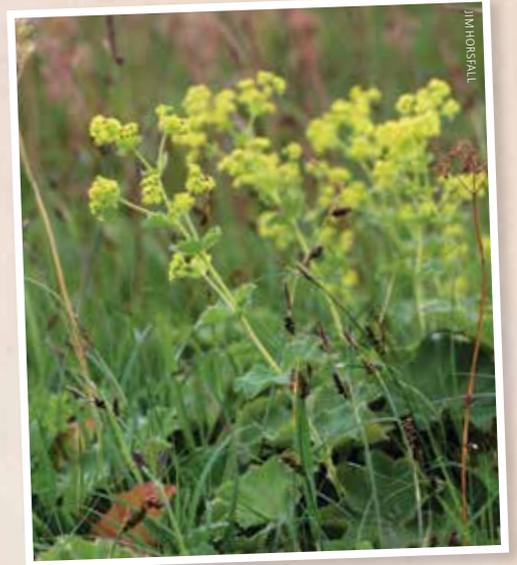
Melancholy thistle
Cirsium heterophyllum

Unlike many thistles, this plant has no sharp spines. Its name refers to its history of being used to cure melancholia, now commonly known as depression.



Lady's mantle
Alchemilla species

The name Alchemilla comes from the ancient practice of alchemy – its cup-like leaves are notable for catching and collecting beads of dew. Believing there to be something magical about the plant, pre-18th Century European alchemists would attempt to turn base metals into gold using the dew drops.



Pignut
Conopodium majus

The small white flowers grow from a small, round tuber which is edible and has a nutty taste.

Globeflower
Trollius europaeus

Due to the flower shape it relies on specific pollinators such as chastocheta flies (which only feed on globeflower), micromoths and bumblebees that are able to force their way through the petals.

