

The Fairfield Association

Review of meadow areas, including:

- (a) grazing pasture (Big Meadow, Lower Sowerholme, West Field and in principle the Gun Range)
- (b) hay meadows (Hay Meadow, Carr House Meadow)

Background

The Fauna fields (Big Meadow and the hay meadows) are entering their fifth year under our management and HLS prescriptions, so in theory we should have meaningful evidence of our progress towards targets – and might even begin to think about what might follow at the end of the HLS period (2021). On the other hand, the Flora fields (Lower Sowerholme and West Field) haven't had long, and West Field has not yet been grazed according to the prescriptions. Nor has the West Field scrape lasted the summer. Across all areas, our laid hedges are a long way below their eventual target height, so there is still only limited habitat, and limited visual protection, for birds and mammals to colonise the fields and their margins.

Achievements

In general there is quite a satisfying number of **Achieveds** (see Performance against NE Success Indicators Jan2016). The obvious highlights are:

- (a) Pasture. Snipe have increased dramatically, even if this winter is a little disappointing, probably but not certainly for external reasons. Grey partridge seem to like West Field, but wintering lapwing apparently don't (at least while the hedges are low).
- (b) Hay meadow: steadily diversifying herb (wild flower) cover, with Carr House Meadow following Hay Meadow in line with its slightly later treatment. 'Semi-improved' status achieved. Hay providing a useful supply for cattle graziers.

Issues

Current

(a) Pasture.

- Fertility/pollution. Persistent algae (and smell) in Big Meadow suggest high level of organic matter. Is our control of cattle numbers sufficient?
- Injurious weeds. Ragwort is persistent, in the form of both new seedlings and regenerating older plants, and it continues to need a high level of volunteer commitment (now including a training cost for licensed sprayers). With flowering largely controlled, new seedlings should continue to decline, but both glyphosate and digging are only partially effective for mature plants, so the end is not yet in sight. Thistle should be relatively easily controlled but will need careful timing of volunteer effort. Dock has potential to become a ragwort-type problem, though it's not poisonous to stock and a small quantity may be tolerable if it's cut before seeding, so best nipped in the bud. Soft rush spreading steadily. White Park haven't controlled it and, in the current warm winter, neither – yet – have Fell ponies. Some hand-, or small or large machine-cutting, perhaps followed up by pony grazing (Exmoors next winter?? More than 2??), may be the best option. Needs further trial, plus probably grazing advice...
- Sward height / poaching / mosaic of rush and grass. Poaching and sward height have been fine, apart from probably unavoidable poaching round gates and on the gun range. But owing to the spread of rush, the patchwork which snipe and other waders are said to prefer is not materialising, at least in the wet sections. See above on rush control and grazing.

(b) Hay meadows.

- Progress from 'semi-improved' to 'lowland meadow' (GO6) is slow. On the latest soil tests, fertility (phosphate levels) is still quite high. Ph level is also more acid than ideal, but we've been advised (convincingly) against liming, which would need repeat applications. Last year's appearance of orchids and the gradual spread of other plants suggests that there is a good deal of latent potential for more diversity, even if acid-hating plants are not going to colonise. Patience is probably the best option. We should keep an eye on yellow rattle cover (it's reputed to settle back after early explosion).
- Weeds (ragwort, soft rush): as for pasture (above).

(c) General

- Grazing. We **need to ensure that cattle numbers, timetables and grazing practice are within HLS guidelines and the terms of the agreement.** Usefulness of ponies not yet clear, though the weather hasn't helped.
- Predation: foxes, cats and corvids probably all deter and/or attack breeding birds and reduce our success rates. Anything to be done? Deer presumably tolerable in present numbers. Malign humans a potential threat to birds and hares (more in arable areas) and a worry to graziers.

Longer term

- Grazing. **The current grazier may not wish to continue until the end of the agreement (2041!).** Alternatives could include finding another heritage cattle grazier or more ponies. Or goats...
- There's no reason to think that the Girls' Grammar School will do anything with their field in the near or medium term: but (a) we don't have a proper lease on School Pond, merely verbal consent (and a map to underline it) to include it in the HLS agreement, so the future of the pond after 2021 could be uncertain; (b) if they were to develop School Field for sports purposes it would severely complicate the cattle management arrangements.
- Finance. There's little point in serious planning for post-HLS until we know the EU referendum results – and given recent volatility in DEFRA budgets, probably little more point even if the UK remains in the EU. But it's not so very long until 2021, and we should perhaps make ourselves aware of how much the meadow areas would be costing us without the relevant HLS payments.
- We might also discuss in due course whether the present aims and targets (across the whole reserve) are ones we would want to carry on after the present agreement ends. It would be possible, for example, to convert the marshy area of Big Meadow to reed bed, to split it into parts with different management regimes (e.g. more hay meadow) and so on.