

## The Restoration of a Species Rich Down



Steve Pollard, Great Cowhill Down, Beetor Farm, North Bovey

My father came to Beetor in 1964, but the farm hadn't been sold for 350 years. This fact has helped shape a strong sense of stewardship, of wanting to leave the land in good stead for the next generation. The farm is still a working farm, so while a balance has to be struck with making a living, wildlife conservation is now my primary focus and passion. In the bleak depths of a Dartmoor winter, I look forward to the first Bluebells, the spiky leaves of Yellow Rattle and of discovering colourful orchids popped up in new places. I'm enjoying the evolving journey of learning about my meadows and their management, and it's a thrill to see the farm come to life year-on-year.

Beetor's best meadow is Great Cowhill Down, a 6.65 acre, infertile, dry field, formerly a down, with an exposed location at 280m elevation. It was cleared of most of its boulders in the 1970s, and then subsequently cut for hay/silage during Midsummer each year. As the furthest field from the farmstead it has tended to be one of the last cut, and it has also escaped too much 'improvement'. Small amounts of inorganic fertiliser were applied most years. The farm has been in a Natural England Higher Level Stewardship agreement since 2011, and the field is now managed under a Haymaking option.

The steps taken to restore the meadow were:

1. The cessation of all fertiliser applications
2. Flailing of bracken around field edges, and pulling by hand occasional broad-leaved dock and creeping thistle
3. Initially an early-August cut, but for the last couple of years a late-August/early September cut for haylage to enable orchid seeding
4. Aftermath grazing by our Gelbvieh X beef cattle during October. No Spring grazing is necessary due to the field's low fertility
5. The field is being allowed to regenerate naturally, without the introduction of green hay/seed

While the field is still in transition, it has changed considerably over the last seven years, from being a barren field that simply didn't produce much silage, to a hay meadow with an increasing abundance of unimproved, species-rich dry grassland indicators and finer grass species. The presence of three orchid species – Southern Marsh, Heath Spotted, and Greater Butterfly is floristically noteworthy, but also for me one of the greatest delights of summer. In the future, with continued late cuts, the frequency of these orchids is likely to increase, as will that of other late seeding species such as Knapweed.

In early 2018 Great Cowhill Down, along with a mosaic of other hay meadows, species-rich pastures and upland oak woodland at Beetor Farm, totalling 50 acres, was designated as a County Wildlife Site by the DBRC. On a personal level, it was really pleasing to receive this recognition – to know that all that hard work, usually done in the rain, is paying off by reaching the CWS standard. Also, within agricultural subsidy policy there is, of course, an ongoing shift towards looking after the environment, and this funding is also becoming increasingly competitive and result-based. So, for the farm itself, having a CWS designation serves as a strong sign to others, such as Natural England, of our commitment to conserving and restoring wildlife habitats when it comes to applying for new grants or agreements.