



Devon
Biodiversity
Records
Centre

Devon's County Wildlife Sites



What are County Wildlife Sites?

County Wildlife Sites (CWS) are areas of public or private land that are rich in wildlife, often supporting rare or threatened habitats and species. There is a general misconception that all the best nature conservation sites are nationally designated and protected, such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). This is not the case as many CWS are of equal quality, and provide a far better mosaic of connected wildlife havens within the county. Importantly this locally run framework values the many smaller sites, which would not be recognised by national schemes.

Why are County Wildlife Sites so important?

CWS can support both locally and nationally threatened wildlife species and habitats, such as the marsh fritillary butterfly which was once widespread in England and Ireland, but is now restricted to western areas, with Devon's culm grasslands offering very important havens for this species.

The network of CWS provides an important refuge for the counties diverse flora and fauna, and compliments the SSSI and nature reserve network by enhancing the links between them. Because it is run locally, it can be agile enough to take into account changes in the state of our environment on a regular basis. And it can recognise the important part landowners and land managers play at a local level, and help translate that into a county, regional or national context. Below are two examples of why CWS's are needed.



Species/habitat loss

Marsh Fritillary

Nationally the distribution of the marsh fritillary butterfly has reduced by nearly 50% since the 1970's, and importantly, Devon hosts 20% of the known UK colonies. As a species it needs connected networks of habitat, in our county this is mostly damp grasslands dominated by tussock forming grasses. The butterfly forms close-knit colonies on discrete patches of habitat (typically 5 - 20 ha). Adults rarely fly more than 50-100m but a small proportion seem to disperse further. The butterfly is renowned for its large fluctuations in population size that make it highly prone to local extinction, but in "good" years enable it to spread and colonise new sites as well as patches of less suitable habitat. It is known to exist as meta-populations comprising groups of local populations connected by occasional dispersal.

Lowland Meadow

Across the UK over 95% of our lowland meadows have been lost since the 1940's, this is reflected in Devon, with this once common habitat now being a very important find within our landscape. These neutral grasslands provide flower rich areas which create a haven for birds, small mammals and a huge number of invertebrates such as meadow brown and small blue butterflies. But this habitat has become very rare and fragmented, making it difficult for many species to travel between them. One characteristic shared by traditionally managed lowland meadows is the high number of herbs and grasses – they can frequently boast up to 30 grasses and 100 or more wildflower species.



Owning a County Wildlife Site: What does it mean to landowners and managers?

- This framework has been running for over 30 years, and comprises more than 2000 sites that range for 0.5 hectares to sites of many hundreds. Using information from botanical surveys, sites are assessed against national criteria, with some local variations that reflect our rich biodiversity and unique landscape.
- Landowners receive a copy of the survey report, and management advice, or signposting to relevant support at their request. There is no obligation to change management of the site, but it may be that a simple change in how you manage the site can have huge benefits for wildlife on site.
- CWS assessments are made by a panel of local experts (from a range of organisations) to maintain a consistent approach. The criteria covers all priority habitat types and a range of species specific sections provide additional options, for example where a site has a high value for invertebrates or locally important bird species.
- The CWS framework provides our opportunity to protect these important sites, and raise their profile in conservation initiatives and planning, but also to provide monitoring information on the state of our environment in the county.



If you own or manage a CWS you:

- Gain recognition that your site is of significant value for wildlife and its recovery
- Form part of the critically important network of sites, that allow species to move and adapt to climate change and human intervention
- May be more likely to receive free advice, access to support/grants to help manage your land sensitively for wildlife

Case Study

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 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:

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

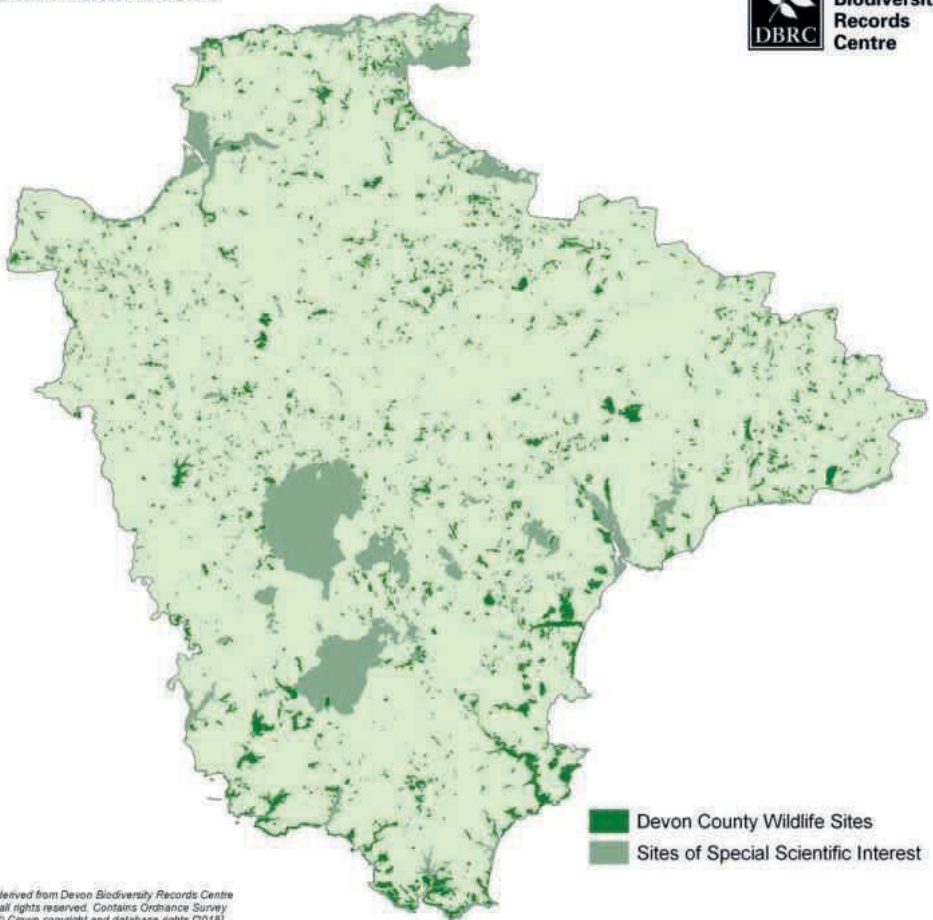
While the field is still in transition it has changed considerably over the last 7 years, from being a barren field that simply didn't produce much silage, to a hay meadow with an increasing

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.



County Wildlife Sites (also known as Local Wildlife Sites) and Sites of Special Scientific Interest in Devon



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In 2010, Professor John Lawton published the first government White Paper recognising the need for a network of functioning, wildlife rich sites - a network that could allow species to move and adapt, through a changing landscape & climate. This paper continues to influence future national policy, and has already driven the development and publication of the new DEFRA 25 year plan. Importantly, it is worth noting that the majority of SSSI were designated over 30 years ago when our understanding of the threats to biodiversity, and its enormous importance to our lives, was far more limited. Their location in Devon can be seen above, and over the last 30 years the large gaps between them have been partially filled with CWS.

Research shows the importance of these semi natural habitats for species resilience and abundance, but it also highlights the relationship between those habitats and other areas of concern, such as soil health, natural flood events and air quality. Future targeting of funding for the natural environment is likely to target areas where multiple benefits can be gained. Sites that offer space for biodiversity, and support other natural processes will become even more important over time, and the CWS framework recognises the amazing work being done in Devon by individuals and organisations who are committed to being part of that solution.



Biodiversity Monitoring Framework (BMF)

This project was set up in 2009, with the aim of determining patterns of change in priority habitats across the whole of Devon.

DBRC lead a county wide survey program focusing on County Wildlife Sites which we hope can be resurveyed every 5 – 10 years, however in some cases CWS had not been revisited since their initial designation in the early 1990's due to a lack of resources for resurvey, or changes in ownership means we cannot contact the landowners. However, DBRC have now seen nearly 1000 sites since the project started, and the results of the surveys helps us keep track of changes, and report on the state of our environment in Devon. There are over 2000 CWS, totalling over 30,000 hectares of land (5% of Devon) this equals the area protected within statutory sites, however, we also have a similar amount of potential sites which have yet to be surveyed and designated. Its vitally important that these sites are seen periodically, as they are representative of what's happening to our biodiversity landscape, and can act as a barometer for climate change, changes in policy, and in our understanding of nature's resilience to change.

For further information about Country Wildlife Sites contact Devon Biodiversity Records Centre (details below)

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