

Wildlife Groundswell Report from National Meadows Day held on Saturday 2nd July 2022

It was delightful to visit three excellent wildflower and grass meadows on National Meadows Day. Between 30 and 40 people came to look at the meadows, and hear Cornwall County Plant Recorder Ian Bennallick identify the many species – in all we looked at 48 wildflowers, 18 grasses and 3 rushes. Our thanks to Ian for his expertise and guidance, as well as to the hosts of the three meadows.

The first meadow was at Goongillings Farm near Constantine, where there has been no chemical input since 1999. Charlie Pugh changed his farming methods then as he realised that fertilisers, herbicides and other substances which he was adding to the crops and to the grass were affecting his health. Since that time he has “allowed the land to do what it wants to do.” So, as well as quite a lot of woodland and scrub, he has “reverted” pastures. He does not cut the grass until the flower seeds have dropped. His land is rich in insect life, such as grasshoppers and moths. Exeter University is currently re-introducing the very rare but native field cricket.

The meadow extends almost to Scott’s Quay on the Helford River, but is separated by a hedge, and unsurprisingly the flora is different on either side. We identified 11 types of grass, 3 rushes, and 26 species of native wild flower.

Thanks also to Paul Gaaney whose expertise includes lichen and fungi – from now on, who will fail to identify King Alfred’s cakes?

Our next port of call was Kestle Barton. Our guide, Ryya, told us how in 2008 a foot of topsoil was removed and a dividing hedge was made with it. Then the land was rotavated, then harrowed, then seeded by hand with a wildflower mix and then harrowed again. Every year in September the meadow grasses are cut, and manually collected, lifted into trailers and used as mulch or for seeding elsewhere. The land has not had any chemical input, nor has it been grazed in all this time. There is a sequence of flowers from the spring, when it is dense with cowslips.

The Eden Project has an ongoing study comparing perennial meadows with annual, and the meadow at Kestle Barton is in this study. It is a perennial meadow as no annual supplementary seed is added. Perennial meadows have a longer flowering season, and may support more pollinating insects, including flies, hoverflies, beetles, moths, bees and wasps.

We met an Exeter University student in Conservation Ecology, Lucy Mooney, who told us about her research looking at plant pollinator interactions within the meadow.

We identified 11 species of grass and 30 native wild flowers.

Our third meadow was at Gear Farm, near St Martin. Dave Webb told us how the field was last ploughed in 1990. Prior to this, mostly barley was grown. The farm has been organic for 30 years. The field is grazed, usually with sheep, from October, at a ratio of 10 sheep per acre. Dave is concerned how some farms allow agricultural runoff into the streams and river, and this causes algal bloom and loss of aquatic life. He understands how many farmers are living with debts which they have been encouraged to take out to purchase machinery, so their farming method choices are made in an attempt to stay afloat financially. Banks have lent large sums as land value has increased. His own choices are made so that he feels comfortable with the way he treats the land and the species that depend on it. He wants to sustain local wildlife as well as provide local food. The main source of income on his farm is his pasty business.

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Grasses and Rushes

It is noteworthy that at all 3 sites, we identified 11 species of grass.

All three sites

Creeping Bent = fiorin
Sweet vernal
Common bent
Crested Dog's Tail
Red Fescue
Perennial Rye Grass
Rough Meadow Grass

Goongillings and Kestle Barton

Cock's Foot
Yorkshire Fog

Goongillings and Gear Farm

Common Bent
Onion Couch

Kestle Barton and Gear Farm

Sweet Vernal

Goongillings only

Slender False Broom
Sweep's Brush
Heath Wood Rush
Soft Rush

Kestle Barton only

Quaking Grass
Smaller Cat's Tail

Gear Farm Only

Timothy
Squirrel Tail Fescue
Soft Brome

Wildflower Species

All three sites

Meadow Buttercup
Common Mouse Ear Chickweed
Cut Leaved Cranesbill
Red Clover
White Clover
Common Dandelion
Smooth Hawk's Beard
Ribwort Plantain
Selfheal
Yellow Rattle
Cat's Ear

Goongillings and Kestle Barton

Common Knapweed

Goongillings and Gear Farm

Creeping Buttercup
Common Sorrell
Creeping Thistle
Marsh Thistle
Spear Thistle
Large Bird's Foot Trefoil
Lesser Trefoil

Kestle Barton and Gear Farm

Lady's Bedstraw
Cow Parsnip
Ox-Eye Daisy

Goongillings only

Common Vetch
Alder Buckthorn
Yellow Bartsia
Fiddle Dock
Wild Madder
Silverweed
Hairy Bird's Foot Trefoil

Kestle Barton only

Betony
Pale Flax
Rough Hawkbit
Musk Mallow
Black Mustard
Bristly Ox-tongue
Scarlet Pimpernel
Corn Spurrey
Prickly Sow Thistle
Common Bird's Foot Trefoil

Gear Farm only

Great Hedge Bedstraw
Common Centaury
Creeping Cinquefoil
Corn Marigold
Ragwort
Toadflax
Germander Speedwell
Lesser Trefoil
Marsh Woundwort

Maggie Freegard
18.8.2022