

EXMOOR FARMLAND ACTION PLAN

1. Introduction

Most of the landscape within the National Park, with the exception of woodlands, is farmed in some way, predominantly for livestock production. This plan addresses the enclosed farm habitats, particularly lowland mixed farmland and upland inbye grassland, including features such as hedges and verges. Loss of habitat diversity in the agricultural landscape has resulted in the loss and decline of many species. Extensively managed, mixed farmland is now an important habitat for many declining invertebrates, birds and small mammals.

This Farmland Action Plan aims to be visionary and has been drawn up in wide consultation with a range of organisations and individuals including farmers and landowners, the NFU and CLA. Some of the proposed objectives and actions are currently not achievable under existing agri-environment schemes, largely the Exmoor ESA and will require changes under this scheme or its (future scheme) if they are to be delivered. This plan therefore hopes to help set a future agenda for proposed changes under the agri-environment review and aims to be used partly as a lobbying document.

Illustrating the importance of farmland habitats, cereal field margins and species rich hedges both have a UK Habitat Action Plan, and a number of birds and other farmland species have UK Species Action Plans, promoting action to reverse the downward trends in their populations, which are shown below.

Links to other plans in this BAP

Neutral grassland: unimproved and semi-improved neutral grasslands are an integral part of the enclosed farm landscape. Specific needs for these grassland types are detailed in the neutral grassland action plan.

Bracken and scrub: bracken and scrub occurs on grasslands within enclosed farmland and provides nest sites and cover for a number of birds, as well as a source of insect food and berries.

Bats: bats feed on invertebrates around species rich hedges, verges and margins, unimproved and semi-improved grassland.

Hornet Robber fly: relies on dung fauna occurring within semi-improved and unimproved grassland.

Rivers and streams: (in preparation)

2. Current status

Bird declines on farmland are well documented, with trends in SW England possibly worse than elsewhere in the country. The situation on Exmoor is not clear, although evidence from an audit of county bird reports and recent local observations, indicates that some UK BAP priority species are present, e.g. linnet, skylark and song thrush. Others which are present just to the east of the National Park include grey partridge and turtle dove. There have also been occasional records of curlew in the Porlock Vale within the last five years.

Key bird species:

Girl bunting (if present)	UK BAP species	BoCC Red List
Grey partridge (if present)	UK BAP species	BoCC Red List
Linnet	UK BAP species	BoCC Red List
Skylark	UK BAP species	BoCC Red List
Song thrush	UK BAP species	BoCC Red List
Turtle dove	UK BAP species	BoCC Red List
Yellowhammer		BoCC Green to Red List
Barn owl		
Little owl		
Others: stonechat, whinchat, mistle thrush, lesser whitethroat		

Key non-avian species:

Bumble bees
Dung inverts
Brown Hare UK BAP species
Butterflies – marbled white, brown hairstreak
Arable weeds - weasel snout (occurs at Porlock marsh and in Bossington), field woundwort, white-flowered mullein, mountain pansy (occurs in two or three fields), field pansy

Key areas

Mixed farmland

Porlock to Dunster Vales
North Eastern edge of NP: Carhampton, Withycombe, Rodhuish, Roadwater, Nettlecombe.
Mixed farmland on the Brendons

Pastoral farmland

Improved and semi-improved grassland occurring across the National Park for livestock rearing (unimproved grasslands covered by neutral grasslands HAP). This excludes land that has been reclaimed from moorland in the past 50 years.

3. Current factors affecting the habitat

- 3.1 Loss of mixed farming to specialised operations, especially for livestock production has occurred over the past 50 years. This has led to a loss of diversity in the farmed landscape.
- 3.2 Intensification of grassland management, such as ploughing, reseeded and fertilisation has led to a loss of invertebrate-rich pastures.
- 3.3 Many farmers are locked into high input, high output systems; if they have already invested in expensive equipment/housing etc, they are unlikely to want to de-intensify.
- 3.4 Specialised farms are unlikely to have the infrastructure to diversify.
- 3.5 A switch from hay to silage production means fields are cut up to three times a year. Cutting during the breeding season will destroy the nests of ground nesting birds such as skylark.
- 3.6 There is currently a greater reliance on silage rather than other winter forage such as stubble turnips.

- 3.7 The use of veterinary chemicals such as Ivermectins for worming cattle, also destroy dung invertebrates that are an important food source for birds and bats. Chemicals used in sheep dip can enter water courses and damage aquatic life.
- 3.8 Intensification of arable management, especially the change from spring sown cereals with a winter stubble, to autumn sown cereals, has drastically reduced the seed source available to farmland birds during the winter. Also, because the crops are thicker during the spring the availability of suitable nest sites in crops has also been reduced. Increased pesticide use is also associated with winter cereals leading to loss of insects and arable weeds.
- 3.9 Loss, or annual cutting of hedgerows has reduced the suitability of the habitat for nesting birds and the ability of hedgerow plants to produce berries and support invertebrates.
- 3.10 Currently, farms entering the ESA scheme cannot increase their area of arable.
- 3.11 Land not registered as IACS arable does not receive subsidy, which acts as a disincentive for encouraging new areas of arable.
- 3.12 The presence of increasing amounts of game cover crops may provide beneficial cover and feeding areas for some declining farmland birds.

4. Current action

- 4.1 Currently there are approximately 650 Exmoor ESA agreements which cover 47,163 hectares and a number of Countryside Stewardship agreements on Exmoor.
- 4.2 Farm advice is carried out by the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, DEFRA (RDS), the National Park Authority, the Somerset and Devon Wildlife Trusts and the National Trust focussing on general farm management including whole farm plans, management of designated areas such as County Wildlife Sites and advising on ESA agreements and Conservation Plans.
- 4.3 37,800 ha of enclosed farmland is under Tier 1, parts 1 to 3, of the Exmoor ESA. This provides payments to maintain permanent pasture including low inputs on semi-improved grasslands, affords basic protection to hedges and offers supplements for hedge management.
- 4.4 The National Park Authority operates its own Farm Conservation Scheme currently covering 826 hectares of farmland which offers both annual payments and capital payments for project work.
- 4.5 A survey of priority breeding bird species is planned for 2002 in key arable areas, particularly in Porlock and Dunster vales and the Brendon Hills. This survey will include brown hare.
- 4.6 The Devon and Somerset Hedge Groups promote the sympathetic management of hedgerows and verges, have produced publications such as the Devon Hedge Pack and run an annual hedge week.
- 4.7 Currently around 20 farms (out of a total of approximately 600 farms) are organic or are in conversion on Exmoor.

- 4.8 The new Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations for uncultivated land and semi-natural areas came into force on 1 February 2002. The Regulations require that farmers and landowners must seek approval from DEFRA before carrying out certain projects such as ploughing or drainage for intensive agricultural purposes where they are likely to have significant effects on the environment.
- 4.9 The Environment Agency has produced '*Best Farming Practices : Profiting from a good environment*' which aims to give guidance to farmers and landowners on good environmental practices which will save them money. DEFRA also has Codes of Good Agricultural Practice for air, soil and water providing good practice guidelines for farmers.

5. Action Plan objectives and proposed targets

Objective:

To maintain and expand existing populations of priority farmland birds and other key farmland species. Many of the objectives are subject to new agri-environment options becoming available through the national agri-environment review.

Targets:

- 5.1 To increase, through audit and survey, our knowledge of the distribution and status of key farmland birds, invertebrates, mammals and arable plants on Exmoor.
TARGET: ongoing
- 5.2 To ensure no further net loss of arable land within the National Park. New arable areas must only be encouraged in appropriate areas that were historically in arable cultivation and must only be on areas which are currently improved grassland.
TARGET: ongoing
- 5.3 To increase the area of winter stubble/spring grown cereals within areas which are currently arable. Currently there are 4370 hectares of arable land on Exmoor.
TARGET: 400 ha or 10% of current arable areas under winter stubble/spring grown cereals by 2010.
- 5.4 Seek to introduce/increase arable in areas dominated by improved grassland, such as stubble turnips, whole crop silage or crimped grain silage. Currently there is estimated to be 42,000 hectares of improved grassland on Exmoor.
TARGET: 2000 ha or 5% of current improved grassland in arable by 2010.
- 5.5 Seek to increase the diversity and structure of improved and semi-improved grassland. There are currently just over 31,000 hectares of grassland in Tier 1 parts 1 and 2a but only 720 hectares in Tier 1 Part 2b.
TARGET: 10,000 ha of grassland managed sympathetically to increase diversity by 2010.
- 5.6 Seek to establish field margins, or rough corners, in key areas in arable, semi-improved and improved grassland. Given that there are almost 4,000 kilometres of hedgerow on Exmoor, there is the potential for in the region of 8,000 kilometres of potential grass margins.
TARGET: 500 km or 10% of potential margins (2m or 6m) in improved grassland by 2010
60 km or 10% of potential margins and conservation headlands in arable by 2010
rough corners
- 5.7 Establish appropriate management of important hedgerows and species-rich grass verges.

TARGET: 50% of hedgerows under traditional management or under hedgerow restoration scheme of ESA by 2005.

TARGET: 90% of species rich grass (road) verge under positive management, by 2005.

5.8 Seek to increase the amount of organic land within the National Park.

TARGET: 50 organic or in conversion farms by 2005.

6. FARMLAND ACTION PLAN

Policy and legislation

6.1 Review agri-environment scheme prescriptions to include a range of arable options available in key areas.

Partners: DEFRA, ENPA, EN, EA, NGOs. 2005

6.2 Review agri-environment scheme prescriptions so that improved grassland options are more creative e.g. margins, grazing exclusions to create structurally diverse grassland.

Partners: DEFRA, ENPA, EN, EA, NGOs. 2005

6.3 Review agri-environment scheme prescriptions so that the scheme introduces extensive arable into appropriate pastoral areas.

Partners: DEFRA, ENPA, EN, EA, NGOs. 2005

6.4 Seek to ensure that ESA and organic schemes can be integrated.

Partners: DEFRA, ENPA, EN, NGOs. 2005

Site safeguard and management

6.5 Actively promote take up of the ESA in priority areas to establish or extend a network of farms under positive agreements to benefit farmland species.

Partners: DEFRA, ENPA, EN, NGOs. 2005

6.6 Promote use of non-damaging veterinary chemicals on animals grazing grasslands within priority farmland areas and ensure careful disposal of sheep dips.

Partners: FWAG, WTs, EN, ENPA, EA, NT 2008

6.7 Ensure agreement renewals consider farmland species issues and encourage uptake of new options when they become available.

Partners: FWAG, WTs, EN, DEFRA, ENPA, NT Ongoing

Future research and survey

6.8 Survey of key farmland bird species (and brown hare) in 2002 and at 5 year intervals thereafter.

Partners: RSPB, NT, ENPA 2002, 2007

6.9 Audit of key non-avian farmland species in 2002. Identify future monitoring needs.

Partners: ENPA, SERC, DBRC, WTs, EN. 2002

- 6.10 Audit of species-rich road verges. Identify resurvey needs.
Partners: ENPA, WTs, SERC, DBRC, SCC, DCC. 2008
- 6.11 Audit of species rich hedges and identify priorities for targeting management advice.
Partners: ENPA, WTs, SERC, DBRC. 2008

Advisory

- 6.12 Target advice to farms in priority areas, promoting management that will benefit the key farmland species and bring areas into agreements.
Partners: FWAG, ENPA, DEFRA, WTs, NT. 2006
- 6.13 Provide advice on management of species rich road verges.
Partners: DNPA, WTs, EN, DCC, SCC. 2010
- 6.14 Organise and run training days for advisers and farmers on management to benefit farmland species.
Partners: DEFRA, ENPA, EN, NGOs. 2006

Publicity and Communication

- 6.15 Prepare simple advisory material and contact information, to be made available to all farm managers, including dissemination of existing information. Consider developing one-stop-shop for advice.
Partners: ENPA, RSPB, EN, DEFRA, FWAG, WTs, NT, DHG, SHG. 2005
- 6.16 Raise the profile of the importance of farmland habitats and species through ENPA newsletters and publications and other publicity material.
Partners: ENPA, RSPB, FWAG, WTs, SHG, DHG. Ongoing
- 6.17 Consider establishing demonstration farms and events for farmers and advisors.
Partners: ENPA, RSPB, FWAG, WTs, SHG, DHG, NT, EN, DEFRA. 2008