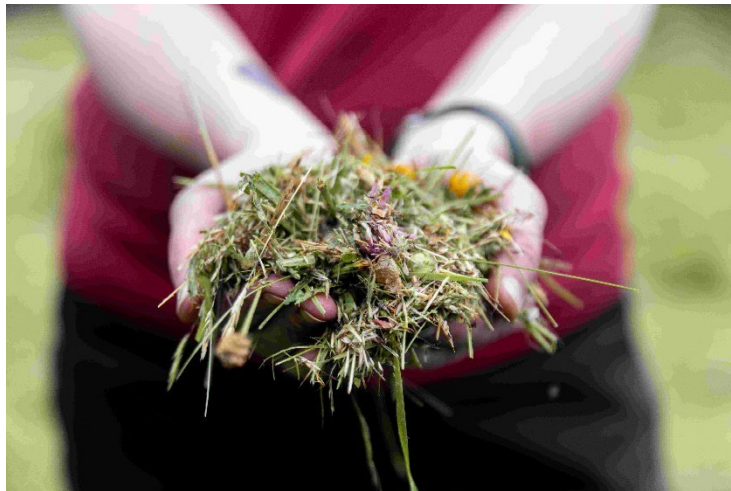




EXMOOR SOWING THE SEEDS PROJECT

Project Update

December 2024



Project Summary

The *Exmoor Sowing the Seeds* Project has been working to revive and restore meadow landscapes across Exmoor National Park. The Project is helping to create a long-term self-sustaining legacy, supporting farming businesses and landowners to access funding for nature recovery and diversification, focussing on unimproved grassland, which currently covers just 3.6% of the National Park. The project so far has been supporting 70 landowners, managers, and community groups to restore, rejuvenate, and create wildflower meadows across over 450 hectares. The project is also working with school groups, centres of learning, and communities, on educational and wellbeing activities which deepens our knowledge and connection to meadows.

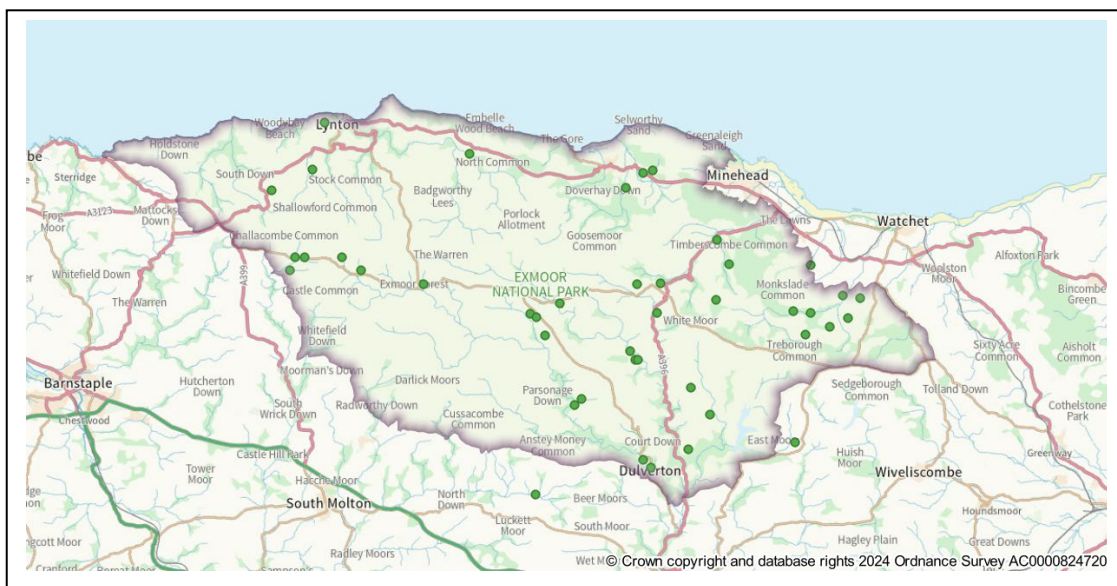
Following on from the successful last few years of the project activities, in 2024 we continued to work with meadow owners, community groups and schools.

Spring

April and May we started to see what was growing in meadows. There is a steady stream of people throughout the year who contact the project asking for advice on their grassland areas, whether it be a small garden meadow or a selection of sizeable fields as part of a farm business. We visit throughout the year but the start of the growing season in spring makes things easier as it's clearer what type of grassland we are looking at, and we can gauge the condition.

The initial visit to landowners or groups is an essential part of our work, learning about them, what resources they have available, and their aspirations for restoration. We have complex discussions in person which has been an important part of the process for us to meet and understand each different landowner, group, situation, and meadow.

This year we are working with an additional 13 new meadow owners and community groups taking it to 70 in total so far, with continued support to meadow owners already working with the project. This has included working with Lyn Climate Action who are a community group developing a community orchard, so the project has been advising them on creating a wildflower meadow area and increasing the wildflowers around the newly planted orchard. This local group has been great to support and there is so much potential to get the local community involved. Hopefully it can be a hub for learning about meadow habitats and wildflowers, heritage orchard growing, and creating useful spaces for wildlife.



Spread of meadow owners and groups working with the project across Exmoor in 2024.

As well as visits, we write bespoke management plans for our meadow owners and groups, which details some of the discussion during the visit and describes the process of restoration. Writing the management plans has proved to be a really valuable part of the process, with landowners able to access information designed specifically for their

meadows, and clear actions to follow throughout the year. Of course, we are always at hand to answer any questions people have, but the plans are a good reference point for each landowner or group.

The botanical surveys and soil sampling are crucial parts of the process, providing valuable information on the type and condition of grasslands. This gives us an indication of the success of any restoration efforts and informs our advice. In 2024 we surveyed 30 different areas, gaining a baseline for new areas and monitoring the progress of meadows already under restoration. We took soil samples for eight different areas that we suspected may be high in nutrients, and lab results confirmed this in some instances, which could be why these areas struggled to establish wildflowers. This provided us with useful data that informed our management decisions on the best course of action for restoration.

Summer

As summer advanced filming began for our short promotional video of the project. The amazing Gemma Gilbert from Ebb and Flow Media joined us for several sessions to record the activities of the project. It's surprising how much material is filmed to create such a short film, but we wanted to show all the project in a nutshell and capture how magnificent meadows are.



Filming the promotional video.

Harvesting this year was challenging due to the unpredictable weather. There is a short window of opportunity to harvest wildflower seed when it is ripe enough but not completely dropped from seed heads. With rain that persisted this meant it was a huge challenge to find a dry time within this window for harvesting. We ended up harvesting in the rain on one day which is far from ideal as wet seed sticks to the equipment and makes drying it problematic.

Despite these difficulties we harvested over two days and collected just over 105 kg of wildflower seed from two meadows on Exmoor, with the help of our ranger team and our trusty brush harvester. Thankfully the seed dried eventually with some careful management.



Sieving wildflower seed just harvested in the field.

Over the summer we also ran several events. These included a wildflower identification workshop where meadow owners and volunteers learnt some techniques for identifying different wildflower species. This can provide them with the skills to monitor the progress of their meadows, and volunteers may be able to assist in citizen science monitoring for the National Park in future.



Wildflower identification workshop



Botanical drawing workshop.

We also ran botanical drawing and meadow writing workshops, which encouraged people to use their senses to capture the wonder of wildflowers and meadows in art and writing.

The project team joined with The Exmoor Society to deliver an event on national meadows day celebrating the joy of meadows. This was held on the Hollam Estate and was well attended, with a chance to explain the meadow restoration process to large groups, and a tour of meadows on the estate.

Autumn

As autumn closes in, we got out and about delivering wildflower seed to our meadow owners.

14 holdings received seed to sow on nearly 13 hectares of meadows across Exmoor. Our meadow owners ranged from small holdings to extensive nature reserves, with seed being distributed right across the ranges of Exmoor. We usually provide a management plan with seed, setting up our meadow owners to start the restoration process.



Meadow owners receiving seed and a management plan.

The remaining seed was sown at Driver and Pinkery, Exmoor National Park Authority (ENPA) land being restored to create nearly 50 hectares of species rich meadow areas.

We were joined by volunteers and staff to sow seeds over some of the fields under restoration. It was a great session, and the sun shone on us all day. These fields had the least number of wildflowers present so the seed should help to re-populate native wildflower species to these grasslands.



Seed sowing with volunteers at Driver.



Seed sowing with Generation Exmoor at Pinkery.

The project ran a seed sowing session at Pinkery with Generation Exmoor, a collection of schools who get involved in practical sessions at our education centre. The children were very enthusiastic and did a great job of getting wildflower seed spread around some of the meadows under restoration.

Our project's wildflower nursery began to take shape, joining the tree nursery at Exford. We intend to grow a few specialist species as plug plants to enhance meadow areas, with species such as betony, cowslip and great burnet sown this autumn.

We hand harvested seeds of devils-bit scabious from a species rich meadow on Exmoor in October. This plant is a late flowering wildflower and can struggle to establish in a

competitive meadow environment, so propagating this plant in a nursery is beneficial. It is also an important food plant for the rare marsh fritillary butterfly. The hand harvested seed was sown at the nursery and should germinate over winter, ready to be planted late spring once established, increasing the habitat for this rare butterfly.

The promotional video was completed, and Gemma has done an amazing job. It totally captures the project and really demonstrates the work we do. It is available to view on ENPA's Sowing the Seeds webpage.

We held an event at Lynmouth Pavilion to show the film and exhibit some of the meadow pictures over the year. It was a great opportunity to promote the project, and despite the challenging weather people came out to see it. We ran the film twice so people dropping in throughout the day could see it, and we had some interesting and valuable conversations around meadow restoration.

Winter

As the year comes to an end, and winter is here, we hope this period of cold will be working its magic on all the wildflower seeds sown this year, breaking dormancy in a process called vernalisation. So, as spring arrives there can be a burst of growth, and the meadow wildflowers can flourish in their new environment.

Looking forward to spring, we hope to run some interesting and useful workshops in the new year for landowners and groups on soil health and meadows. Watch this space, we will keep you updated as things develop.

