



**Cotswolds
National
Landscape**

AUTUMN 2024

GLORIOUS COTSWOLD GRASSLANDS



PROGRAMME NEWSLETTER

Welcome to our latest newsletter. We've had a busy few months - with challenging wet weather and conditions, but a consistently high level of participation - from landowners and managers, to volunteers and partner organisations. And a record-breaking harvesting season. Read on for all the details!

Another harvest success

The Glorious Cotswold Grasslands programme has grown on previous harvests to collect nearly 3 tonnes of wildflower seeds from 30 donor sites. Now, we are sowing seed on over 70 hectares of recipient meadows, with enough seed for a further 30 hectares to be sown in spring on bare soil sites. The season was challenging. This year's warm, wet spring and cool, wet summer gave the grass a massive boost and the farmers a bumper hay crop; but the brush harvesters and volunteers had a huge amount of grassy material to wade through to extract the wildflower seeds. The team was beset by machinery problems: both harvesters needed their frames re-welded; and the longest-serving member of the team, our Land Rover Defender, faced a series of breaks. On the bright side, this meant our newest team member Tom lucked out when a generous seed donor lent him their gorgeous Ferguson tractor to harvest for the day! As always, all the season's challenges were made easier with the dedication and reliability of our volunteer team, who put in a combined 800 hours of harvesting help. A mix of old hands and new faces brought a wealth of knowledge about best practice and innovative ideas to make each harvest day run smoothly. A massive thanks from the team; the programme work could not happen without them.



Tom with the Ferguson



Habitat management

This summer saw the details of a new funding option for farmers released. GRH6 (Manage priority habitat species-rich grassland) is available under the new expanded Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI). It will pay £646/ha to landowners for managing or restoring species-rich grassland. This is a welcome four-fold increase on the previous payment rate and with no minimum size of landholding, this will go a long way to support large-scale grassland restoration. Other positive changes are the increased percentage of the area permitted to go to scrub (from 5% to 10%) which will encourage the 'mosaic' habitats that are a key part of nature's recovery, and the inclusion of funding for capital items such as ground-preparation and brush-harvested seed. If you would like advice on this option, botanical surveys or any other aspect of grassland restoration, please do get in touch.

[More information here.](#)



Tom Harcourt

A new face

This harvest season we were pleased to bring a new team member on board. Tom Harcourt joined us from the Green Spaces team at Stroud Town Council. A geographer by training, Tom entered the world of conservation with the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust as a Land Management Wild Trainee. Still a novice botanist, he's had to adjust to a world of quadrats and hand lenses but is learning fast and steadily becoming enamored with identifying our many hundreds of native flowers. He also helped Lorna deliver our bumper seed harvest, putting in the hours fixing equipment, sorting seed and managing volunteer harvest days.



Lorna Baggett

And a farewell

On a sadder note, we are saying farewell to Lorna. Lorna has been a part of the GCG team since March 2023 and joined the team to lead on our pioneering programme to restore wildflower grasslands using a Biodiversity Net Gain methodology, funded by National Highways. These grasslands will be managed to improve their diversity and condition until at least 2053, so Lorna is leaving the Cotswolds with a 30-year legacy! In her time here, Lorna has also been an integral part of all other aspects of the programme: our botanical surveys, winter habitat management, landowner advice, and most notably managing this summer's seed harvest - delivering the best harvest yet (despite it being the wettest 12 months in England since 1836). We'll miss her greatly, but wish her all the best with her move away from the Cotswolds and in her new position overseeing the biodiversity projects of the Malvern Hills District Council.



Kestrels have had a good summer this year

Anna's species focus

...kestrels.

I've lost count of the number of times I've pointed kestrels out this summer to anyone who'll listen. These fabulous little falcons are regulars over our grassland sites, but have suffered significant population declines since the 1970s. As a result, they are amber listed by the Birds of Conservation Concern 5. However, in 2024 they had an extremely successful breeding season and young birds are spreading their wings throughout the Cotswolds. Outside my role at CNL, I am a licensed bird ringer – and monitor a number of raptor species for the Gloucestershire Raptor Monitoring Group, including kestrels. 2024 saw large broods fledging from traditional sites, and many abandoned historical sites were used again – I even found one nest on the bedroom window ledge of a house near Bibury! Presumably this was due to an abundance of their main prey item, the field vole, and perhaps also suggests that more birds survived over winter last year than usual.



Harebells and crosswort on a verge. Well-managed verges can be an essential haven for these species, which suffer in hay-making situations where the meadow is cut too early for them to seed.

Glorious volunteers

We're very fortunate on our programme to have our Glorious Volunteers, all of whom also give their time and expertise to other projects. From this newsletter on, we'll be asking them to share these experiences to showcase the amazing work others are doing in the Cotswolds and the essential role volunteering plays in aiding nature's recovery. This edition we asked Jan to share her experience of fighting for change to protect the biodiversity on road verges. Road verges account for roughly half of our remaining species-rich grassland. When they are properly managed, they comprise a huge network of nature corridors for grassland species, so this is a hugely important struggle she has taken on. Hats off to Jan!

Last summer, I enjoyed daily walks along a road near my home, rejoicing in the wealth of wildflowers on the verges there. My enjoyment was rudely interrupted by the unexpected mowing of a bee orchid which had come into flower not a week before! Although the plant can survive this, it wouldn't set seed that year, and the increased nutrients from grass clippings would eventually cause the orchid to be outcompeted by grasses. I contacted the Gloucestershire County Council Highways Department and became aware of the [GCC Conservation Road Verge Register](#); the Council's policy for the protection and beneficial management of road verges. Since this point, I began doing botanical surveys on local road verges; and have sought to have those that meet the criteria added to the Register. To date, I have recommended 15 road verges of 0.5-1 miles in length each; verges which would also qualify as Lowland Calcareous Grassland Priority Habitat. This amounts to 10 hectares of grassland spared from the mower. On my local verges, one can see species such as meadow cranesbill, cowslip and field scabious, species which can compete with the grasses in these high nutrient situations. And, one can also see the potential for others to appear, were they only to be given the chance!

Contact us

anna.field@cotswolds-nl.org.uk

tom.harcourt@cotswolds-nl.org.uk