

Views About Management



A statement of English Nature's views about the management of Middle Harling Fen Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

This statement represents English Nature's views about the management of the SSSI for nature conservation. This statement sets out, in principle, our views on how the site's special conservation interest can be conserved and enhanced. English Nature has a duty to notify the owners and occupiers of the SSSI of its views about the management of the land.

Not all of the management principles will be equally appropriate to all parts of the SSSI. Also, there may be other management activities, additional to our current views, which can be beneficial to the conservation and enhancement of the features of interest.

The management views set out below do not constitute consent for any operation. English Nature's written consent is still required before carrying out any operation likely to damage the features of special interest (see your SSSI notification papers for a list of these operations). English Nature welcomes consultation with owners, occupiers and users of the SSSI to ensure that the management of this site conserves and enhances the features of interest, and to ensure that all necessary prior consents are obtained.

Management Principles

Calcareous grassland

In order to maintain a species-rich sward and its associated insects and other invertebrates, calcareous grassland requires active management. Without management it rapidly becomes dominated by stands of rank grasses, such as Tor-grass. These grasses, together with the build up of dead plant matter, suppress less vigorous species and lower the diversity of the site. Eventually, the site will scrub over. Traditionally, management is achieved by grazing. The precise timing will vary both between and within sites, according to local conditions and requirements. These may include stock type or the needs of particular plants or animals; certain invertebrates, for example, can benefit from the presence of taller vegetation. However, grazing should generally aim to keep a relatively open sward without causing excessive poaching. Light trampling can be beneficial by breaking down leaf litter and providing bare patches for seed germination and some invertebrates. An element of managed scrub, both within and fringing calcareous grassland can be of great importance to certain birds and invertebrates, but excessive scrub should be controlled.

Valley mire

Fen often develops within valleys and the origins and movement of the water within the fen give rise to a number of different vegetation zones. The variety of plant and

animal life in the valley mire is closely linked to the number and type of zones it contains.

Management should aim to maintain the groundwater quality and quantity, though the quantity is not likely to be naturally constant throughout the seasons or between wet and dry years. The groundwater is often susceptible to contamination by agricultural fertilisers, or by pollution leaking from landfill sites.

Grazing is important in the management of the valley mire. Animals help to break up the tussocks of rank grasses such as purple moor grass, opening the sward up to a greater variety of plants. The precise timing and intensity of grazing will vary according to local conditions and requirements. Some (but not excessive) trampling is necessary to create open soil, for invertebrates, mosses and seedling establishment. Grazing also limits the spread of willow, alder and birch carr, which naturally tends to develop around the central watercourse and it should be restricted to this area, other than for a few isolated clumps elsewhere for the benefit of birds and invertebrates. Swamps are also important for invertebrates and birds and the inclusion of some swamp vegetation, such as reedbed, within the mosaic of habitats present will add to the conservation value of the site. However, excessive spread of reed, reed canary grass, or reed sweet grass is likely to be an indication of worsening water quality, the cause of which should be investigated and addressed to maintain the characteristic fen communities.

Stock feeding, or the location of grazing infrastructure, for example stock shelters, should take place downstream of the valley mire. This is to ensure the mire vegetation does not become enriched by nutrients from animal food or dung, or even from carcasses, causing unwanted changes in the composition of the characteristic mire vegetation in favour of tall, species-poor communities.

Drainage schemes should not intercept the sources of ground and surface water to the valley mire. It is important for the watercourses of the valley mire not to receive run-off from fertilised land or surface water from farmyards. The bed of the watercourse should not be lowered, nor should its water level be artificially raised, other than as part of a well thought-out conservation scheme. This will ensure the various vegetation components of the valley mire are maintained in their ideal proportions, and that 'head-ward' erosion is not triggered, in which increased flow gradually erodes the peat and silt on which the valley mire has developed.

All habitats

The habitats within this site are highly sensitive to inorganic fertilisers and pesticides, applications of which should be avoided both within the site itself and in adjacent surrounding areas. Herbicides may be useful in targeting certain invasive species, but should be used with extreme care. Access to this site, and any recreational activities within, may also need to be managed.