

Wet Grassland Project
Report by Senior Ecologist

Summary: Wet grassland is a priority habitat that dominates the landscape of the Broads and rural farming economy (Broads Biodiversity Action Plan, 2009, Biodiversity and Water Strategy, 2013 and Why Farming Matters to the Broads, 2010). Investment in biodiversity is required to enhance bird and dyke wildlife populations of the marshes. This partnership project provides an excellent collaborative model for bidding for Heritage Lottery Funds for biodiversity work. These combined efforts put the Broads as one of the 8-9 national leaders in wetland restoration.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Broads has around 11,000 ha (c.40% of the area) of wet grassland. Some of this supports wetland birds and rich wildlife in the dykes, although much of the area is in need of biodiversity improvement, with issues from water quantity and quality, impacts of climate change and flooding, as well as negative impacts from encroachment of leisure and household activities onto grazing marshes.
- 1.2 The significance of the Broads is reflected over 1,500 species of conservation concern depending on the Broads for their future. Over 60% of these rarest species depend entirely on good supplies of quality freshwater. The projects restoration of flows of base-rich waters from upland and floodplains and restoration and recreation of wet grassland will be important for UK priority species.
- 1.3 Important work is required to restore and re-create lowland wet grassland and associated habitats as well as adapt management to cope with a changing climate. Working with the 'grain of nature' seeking to re-establish near-natural hydrological processes, where feasible as well as recognising the importance to economy, society is well evidenced through local (e.g. Broads Ecosystem Accounting), national (e.g. England Biodiversity Strategy, Defra 25 year Plan) and international policy and guidance (e.g. Ramsar, Agenda 21 from Rio Earth Summit).
- 1.4 This report provides and update on a partnership project to secure funding to improve wet grassland habitats in the Broads and across the UK.

2 The Wet Grassland Project

- 2.1 This project is a Natural England led partnership programme. It was originally seeking to secure £16 million of external funding to benefit nine landscape-scale wet grassland areas across England. Each will benefit from an average of £1.5 million for delivery of conservation actions and around £250,000 for access and engagement outcomes (the remaining funding will be used to manage the initiative).
- 2.2 It was aimed that the stage one application would be submitted to Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) on 1 December 2016 and if approved in April 2017, and the development round is successful, delivery will take place over five years from April 2019 with a LIFE funding application submitted in autumn 2017 to provide additional match.
- 2.3 However, in light of the referendum result there is now considerable uncertainty as to the eligibility of European projects involving the UK, and alternative funding plan will need to be explored. The early and initial national steer from Natural England is that it may be possible to go ahead with HLF (and other potential sources), but without EU LIFE. Local discussion has included one approach which may be for the Broads to join with 1-2 other project areas (rather than 8-9 right across the country, as at present). This would allow a smaller combined bid and could possible include working with the Cambridgeshire Fens. If this bid is under £5M in total we may aim for an early 2017 application window under HLF.
- 2.4 List of potential Partners includes: Broads Authority (BA), Natural England (NE), Norfolk Wildlife Trust (NWT), Suffolk Wildlife Trust (SWT), RSPB, Water Management Alliance (WMA), Environment Agency (EA), Norfolk Rivers Trust (NRT), Norfolk Farm Wildlife Advisory Group (NFWAG). The National Trust has also expressed interest.
- 2.5 As a result of farming interest in wet grassland habitats, Broads Authority and Natural England have informed the National Farmers Union about this bid. In addition the Broadland Catchment Partnership has been informed as a result of the Broads Land Management element of the bid (see 3.4). It is worth noting that most of the funding and projects will occur on nature reserves either owned by RSPB and the Wildlife Trusts, or under agreement with private landowners. The Broads Land Management element of the bid will provide advice and incentives to manage to private landowners who want to be involved.
- 2.6 The Broads Wetland Partnership will significantly deliver against the vision for the re-establishment of lowland wet grassland through a major project of restoration and recreation of wet grassland across 930 ha of protected SSSI and N2K sites in the Broads and North Norfolk. This will be complimented by ground-breaking investigation of hydrological functioning of the floodplain and valley side habitats. In addition to the core areas, the project will impact on a significantly wider cluster area through the engagement of adjoining/

neighbouring landowners through land management advice and control of invasive species with the scope to benefit a further 2500 ha.

- 2.7 The project provides resilience against climate change effects and restores natural ecological functioning at the landscape scale. It also provides significant opportunities for public engagement and appreciation of the Broads landscape that is often difficult from the land. It is highly innovative work that could revolutionise thinking on natural functioning of wetland sites where catch drains are present.
- 2.8 There will be access and engagement projects that sit alongside the wet grassland restoration projects. It is likely that two officers will be appointed, a Project Manager and an Access and Engagement officer.

3 Three project components

Restore and recreate lowland wet grassland across protected sites

- 3.1 This is the major focus and of the bid. Seven projects will deliver landscape scale benefits against this objective on 930 ha. In each case, the project will support the adaptive capacity by encouraging near natural hydrological functioning. The projects will encompass a range of approaches/processes from establishing holistic water management at Upton Fen (Norfolk) and Carlton/Oulton Marshes (Suffolk) to developing dynamic water level and land form management around Breydon Water. Natural hydrological functioning will also be re-established through the direct reconnection of grassland to the Hickling Broad flood plain and in the Stiffkey Valley through the removal of flood-banks and improved floodplain connection, in conjunction with the relevant authorities.

Catch dyke - restoring the natural hydrological connection between upland and lowland habitats

- 3.2 A pioneering element of the bid is work is to recreate natural seepage zones at the edge of wetland sites in the valley side area. This may require land purchase and monitoring to assess this trial to bring back more natural groundwater water supply to wetlands.
- 3.3 This is a highly innovative aspect of the project and based on recent research into the role of a catch dyke, it has the potential to revolutionise and inform thinking on the natural functioning of wetland sites in the UK and internationally where catch drains are present.

Broads Land Management

- 3.4 A minor, although essential, supporting and sustaining part of the bid is coordinated Broads landowner liaison. This will help restore and create buffering schemes that slow water flow” and manage invasive species

3.5 All partners have considerable and well-established mechanisms for landowner liaison in the Broads and much work has been done to date to engage lowland neighbours with appropriate wetland land management. The project would allow for all partners to share best practice and common approaches to engage upland landowners to protect the downslope resource. Opportunities would be given to deal with the considerable challenge of invasive species through direct action by the partners. This non-NGO owned element of the project has already been developed significantly such that we estimate around 2500ha as benefitting from involvement.

4 Conclusion

4.1 This project is required to support the delivery of local and national targets for biodiversity. We are adapting the projects to be eligible to funders following the referendum result and considerable uncertainty of gaining EU funding that the original project was based around.

4.2 As a partnership project, it is the first time that Broads partners have collaborated on such a wide scale to seek funding for common goals for biodiversity. This may be a model for future habitat-wide funding bids in the Broads.

Background papers:	None
Author:	Andrea Kelly
Date of report:	4 July 2016
Broads Plan Objectives:	BD1, BD2, BD3, BD4
Appendices:	None