

Solihull Habitat and Nature Improvements

A programme of woodland, grassland, wetland and water quality improvements

This project has enabled almost 30 hectares of meadow improvements to five parks.

What is a meadow?

A meadow is grassland which is not regularly grazed or cut, but instead allowed to grow to produce hay. Meadows that contain a large range of different grass and wildflower species have usually developed over long periods of time as a result of traditional farming practices. Historically each farm would have had permanent pasture for grazing, and meadows for hay that was cut and stored to feed the livestock over winter.

Enhancing our meadows

Before improvements, the grassland of this park had few types of grass and wildflowers, which meant limited ecological value. Therefore seed was collected from local species-rich meadows, cutting the native wildflowers and grasses in late summer just after flowering. This 'green hay' was brought to this park and spread, so that the seed had the chance to germinate and enhance the grassland for wildlife and people.

Managing our meadows

Regular yearly cutting will help to create a healthy meadow. The grass will receive an annual hay cut between July and August, which is the best time to mow meadows for both wildlife and practical hay making considerations. Parts of the meadow may be left uncut so that later flowering species can seed and to provide areas of longer grass as an opportunity for some insects and small mammals.

Why are meadows important?

Meadows attract a multitude of wildlife that could not thrive in other habitats. A species-rich meadow can contain over 40 species of plants per square metre, along with a huge diversity of other wildlife species including fungi, reptiles, amphibians, small mammals, bats, birds and insects including bees and butterflies.



Over 97% of the UK's meadows have been lost since the 1930s, when they were ploughed and the soil fertilised to grow food during the Second World War. That's three million hectares – an area one-and-a-half times the size of Wales. Species-rich grassland now only covers a mere 1% of the UK's land area.

Dickens Heath Country Park

Dickens Heath Country Park Local Nature Reserve has two fields of semi-improved grassland separated by a central hedge, East Field and West Field. Both of these meadows were identified as species-poor and in 2017 this project enhanced the grassland using green hay.

The green hay was from Brook Meadow, Bakers Lane, Dorridge, a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) meadow managed by the Warwickshire Wildlife Trust and open to the public to visit.

Some species of animals and plants found in the meadow

Barn owls (*Tyto alba*) are perfectly adapted to hunt with deadly precision in the dark of night, with their stealthy and silent flight. Their heart-shaped faces direct high-frequency sounds, enabling them to find mice and voles in the vegetation. They will sometimes hunt in the daytime. Barn owls have been known by many different nicknames, such as 'ghost owl', 'church owl' and 'screech owl'. Look out for them flying low over fields and hedgerows at dawn and dusk.



©Darin Smith

Crested dog's-tail (*Cynosurus cristatus*) is a tufted, perennial grass found in grasslands and meadows. It has short, upright flower spikes with a tightly packed cluster of spikelets (containing the flowers) arranged in a long, rectangular shape. It is the food plant of caterpillars of several butterfly species in the brown and skipper families.



Yellow rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*) is one of our most important meadow wild flowers. In early spring the seeds germinate and grow quickly. As their roots develop they seek out the roots of plants growing nearby, especially grasses. Once contact is made the yellow rattle draws water and nutrients from them, suppressing their growth by as much as 60%, creating space for other flowers to grow. The flowers of yellow rattle are pollinated by large bees and are followed by large, puffy seed pods. When these ripen and dry, the seed inside rattles around and in the past farmers used this sound as their cue to cut the hay.

