

Weston Hills - Phase 2 - Reintroduction of Grazing - 2013

Weston Hills in Baldock is a County Wildlife Site with a lovely mix of habitats including beech woodland and chalk grassland, which is a priority Biodiversity Action Plan habitat for the county. The site is part owned by HCC's Rural Estate and part by North Herts District Council, who manage the whole site. The Countryside Management Service have worked with the DC and liaised with the Rural Estate to develop and implement a 5-year management plan that is seeing restoration of these important habitats alongside improvements for visitors.

The latest work sees the reintroduction of cattle to help restore and maintain the valuable chalk grassland. This is a diverse habitat that develops where, historically, livestock grazed on the thin, dry and nutrient-poor soils overlying chalk bedrock. The harsh conditions (low nutrients, high pH and free-draining soil) prevent domination by vigorous plants, and result in a rich floral community (there can be 40 different species in just one square metre of turf!). This is an increasingly rare habitat and a national priority for conservation, now restricted to very small patches of northern Hertfordshire where it was once common.

Throughout the summer a range of chalk-tolerant plants cover the slopes. Autumn Gentian, Clustered Bellflower, Fairy Flax, Harebell, Quaking Grass, Small Scabious, Wild Basil and Wild Thyme are just a few. Six species of Orchid are found here including Bee, Common Spotted and Pyramidal. A mosaic of scattered scrub, including Spindle, Wayfaring Tree and Dog Rose, around the grassland areas provides shelter for many species such as Marbled White, Common Blue and Brimstone Butterflies, Slow Worm and Common Lizard. Several species of Warbler and even the occasional Turtle Dove visit during the summer.

In recent times the grassland has been maintained by cutting and removing the arisings, to stop it getting overgrown with bushes. Volunteers spent several days each year raking up the cut grass from the steep slopes to stop it smothering the delicate plants. The cattle will do a much better job than cutting, in a more natural and sustainable way. Four English Longhorn cows will graze the site between August and November, spending part of their time in each of the two grazing compartments. They are a traditional English breed that are docile with people and dogs and ideal for grazing this kind of herb-rich grassland.

In addition to regular checks by the graziers, we have a very active group of locals keeping an eye on the cows. As well as interested residents and walkers, four local volunteers have been formally trained as "stock checkers" to help with this.

The public still have access to the site throughout the year. They are just asked to keep dogs on leads when the cows are present.

The work has largely been funded by a grant from Natural England's Environmental Stewardship Scheme with the rest from North Hertfordshire District Council.