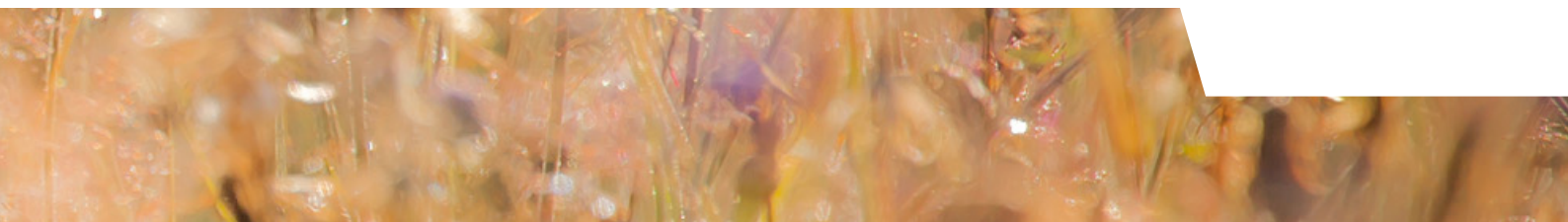




Save our Magnificent Meadows

July 2014 - November 2017





Introduction

Save Our Magnificent Meadows was the UK's largest partnership project transforming the fortunes of vanishing wildflower meadows, grasslands and wildlife. Led by Plantlife, the partnership was made up of 11 organisations, including Ulster Wildlife, and supported thanks to National Lottery players.

In Northern Ireland, the project focused on protecting and restoring purple moor grass and rush pasture in Counties Fermanagh and Tyrone, and was led by Ulster Wildlife from July 2014 to November 2017, with support thanks to National Lottery players and funding from the Northern Ireland Environment Agency.

Meadows, once a feature of every parish in Northern Ireland, are now an increasingly rare sight. Nearly 7.5 million acres of wildflower meadows have been lost across the UK, so far and they are still being destroyed. Meadows and other grasslands are not only an intrinsic part of our natural heritage they are also rich in landscape character, social customs, folklore and history.

Despite the loss of the vast majority of these habitats in Northern Ireland, a significant proportion of what remains occurs in Fermanagh and west Tyrone.

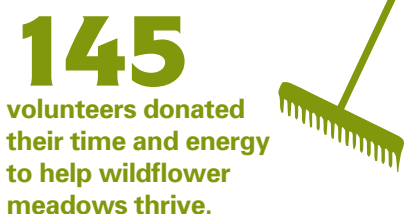
Save our Magnificent Meadows gave people the chance to visit, enjoy and learn about their wildflower meadows and wildlife, raise awareness of the desperate plight of our wildflower meadows and grasslands, and equipped communities with the knowledge and skills to reverse this devastating trend.

Across the UK, over 9,000 ha of meadows and grasslands were enhanced through direct conservation work and the provision of advice and support. And, over 80,000 people took part in events, activities, training or volunteered their time.

In Northern Ireland, the project was delivered by one full-time Grassland Conservation Officer and one part-time Grassland Engagement Officer, alongside many volunteers from all over Ireland and Europe.

This report provides an overview of the project in Northern Ireland, its achievements and impact.

Overview of Achievements in NI



Achievements Against Objectives and Targets

Objective	Target	Achievements
<p>1. Target 6,000 hectares of wildflower meadows and grasslands in nine strategic landscapes across the UK</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restore up to 10 hectares of purple moor grass and rush pasture in counties Fermanagh and Tyrone • Maintain 220 hectares of lowland meadow and purple moor grass and rush pasture in counties Fermanagh and Tyrone • Support landowners across 200 hectares of farmland in counties Fermanagh and Tyrone through advisory visits, management plans written and management agreements put in place. 	<p>Over 12 hectares of purple moor grass and rush pasture restored.</p> <p>287 hectares of lowland meadow and purple moor grass maintained.</p> <p>233 farmers have been engaged through well managed meadows days; restoration workshops; the nurturing of farm 'champions' and local advocacy on farm policy issues; plus advisory visits and contacts across 2420ha of farmland.</p>
<p>2. Give people all over the UK the chance to visit, enjoy and learn about our wildflower meadows and grasslands</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage with at least 512 children from primary and secondary schools as well as other youth and community groups in site visits, species studies, grassland restoration and mini-meadow creation. • Provide opportunities for learning about meadows through 64 activities including school educational sessions, cultural and tradition and oral history projects, open days and festivals, exhibition and displays and guided tours and walks. • Engage and motivate 512 volunteers to donate at least 512 hours of work to the project. 	<p>980 students from 10 primary schools, 15 secondary schools, 2 colleges and Universities and 10 community groups have participated in the project.</p> <p>New opportunities for learning have been provided with the creation of 2 new spaces for learning, 17 guided tours/walks, 3 exhibitions/displays, 1 festival and 20 cultural, tradition and oral history projects reaching a total of 1152 people.</p> <p>145 volunteers from all over Ireland have been involved in the project delivering a total of 2058 hours.</p>
<p>3. Raise awareness of the desperate plight of wildflower meadows and grasslands and equipping communities with the knowledge and skills to reverse this devastating trend.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliver land management courses and tourism and business development training for volunteers, landowners and staff. • Raise awareness of these vital habitats through improving the access to information reaching 510,600 people. 	<p>45 training courses have been delivered through the project with 167 landowners, 11 staff and 29 volunteers trained.</p> <p>4,713,439 potential engagements with the project via the road verges campaigns, leaflets, interpretation campaigns and new visitor information facilities.</p>

Project Highlights

Engagement with the farming community

Although Fermanagh farms are well known for their biodiversity value, the key was to develop awareness and pride in the farmer, and to spread the word in the local community.

A network of key farmers was established across the project area and encouraged to participate through a programme of community talks, one-to-one meetings and active targeting.

Farmers' meetings covered a range of topics from 'best kept meadows' visits and farm lobbying groups, to restoration workshops and wildlife identification sessions at local venues. In-field learning even attracted farmers to events such as wildlife survey demonstrations and sensitive management discussions.

Despite the numerous challenges farmers face, the project was well received in this tight knit community as it placed farmers at the centre of the conservation agenda, and the feedback from events was extremely positive.

Our education work also turned into a useful way of engaging an, at times, difficult to reach farming audience. Through the pupils and teaching staff, many of which were from farming families, word spread to farmers about the importance of managing species-rich grasslands in their care, and that support and help was available.



Traditional hay-making

Engagement with local communities

From the outset, local communities in Fermanagh and Tyrone showed a huge interest in the project and through a range of organised events, from fungal forays and wildflower walks to National Meadows Day, were able to explore, enjoy and learn more about their wildflower meadows and heritage.

Training such as meadow management, brush cutting, scything and hedge-laying was provided to equip the general public and volunteers with the knowledge and skills needed to play an active role in restoring and improving grassland habitats, such as Garrison meadows, Navar and Monastery Meadows.



Volunteers at Garrison

The cultural connections of traditional grassland management were celebrated through reminiscing sessions in day care centres where participants shared stories and memories about wildflowers, hay making and the old ways of farming. Unique fireside story events also gave local communities the opportunity to listen and share stories and poems inspired by wildlife and wildflower meadows, with almost 300 people in total attending.

An exhibition at Enniskillen Castle Museum brought the county's meadows to life for urban dwellers and visitors with video, artefacts and photos showcasing these hidden treasures and their unique wildlife.

Engagement with schools

The response from the education community was extremely positive. Almost 1,000 primary and secondary schoolchildren were engaged in school site visits and educational workshops, from managing and creating meadows to surveying wildlife and building bug hotels.

Nine mini-meadows were created in school grounds, with students getting hands-on with sowing seeds by hand, using a seed fiddle or plug planting. Some schools, like Mount Lourdes Grammar School in Enniskillen, were involved in every step of the restoration process helping with scrub clearance, sowing and hay ruck making. They also helped to set-up the 'Hay Heads' blog - a platform for the community to share picture, poems, or stories celebrating grassland conservation in Fermanagh.

Schoolchildren also engaged in creative art activities, such as painting and poetry, inspired by local wildflower meadows, with teachers and parents also benefiting from the learning experiences.



Garrison PS helping to lay new path at Garrison Parish Meadows



Pupils from St Martin's PS, Garrison, displaying their meadow-inspired artwork

Meadow Restoration

The project's focus in Northern Ireland was to protect and restore lowland meadows and purple-moor grass/rush pasture and their associated wildlife, with much of the Northern Ireland resource found in County Fermanagh.

Purple moor-grass and rush pastures are a priority for nature conservation because they are highly susceptible to agricultural modification. It is also an extremely rich habitat, with up to 50 different plant species present in just four square metres of grassland.

At the beginning of the project, we used a rapid assessment survey to establish a baseline for monitoring the success of restoration works. In 2017 we completed resurveyed restored sites to ensure the project had delivered measurable results in terms of biodiversity enhancement.



Collecting seeds using seed vacuuming

One of the project's success stories is the restoration of Navar Meadows in Fermanagh. This four hectare lough shore site, owned by Forest Service, includes five small meadows and served as a community platform for a whole range of project initiatives. In 1960, the site was described as the most species-rich species rich grassland in Fermanagh, but over the last 10 years the lack of suitable management led to the development of a thick layer of thatch, rush infestation and a complete loss in species diversity.



Restored wildflower meadow at Lough Navar

A conservation action plan was produced for the site and a local farmer, George Ferguson, was approached to take a four year agricultural lease on the fields. The meadows were cut, branches were cleared from gateways and works were completed to improve access.

Three years later, through a combination of yellow rattle seed reintroduction and suitable agricultural management, a repeat rapid assessment survey showed the restoration was a success, with an increase in positive indicator species such as common spotted orchid, meadowsweet, bugle and meadow vetchling. Navar Meadows will now be managed as a hay meadow in the coming years.

Field Trip to the Aran Islands

An exchange trip was arranged for a group of Marlbank farmers to the Aran Islands and the Burren in Co Clare in 2016, as both regions share a limestone landscape and other similarities. The study tour enabled farmers to witness the successful Aran and Burren LIFE sustainable agricultural projects in operation, where farming and conservation go hand-in hand.

The Marlbank farmers were greatly impressed with what they saw, such as scrub clearance from species-rich grasslands and sustainable management of wildlife-rich habitats, and returned home with renewed enthusiasm for managing their land for wildlife, as well as farm produce.

An application was submitted, with support from the Save our Magnificent Meadows project, for a Landscape Scale Agri-Environment initiative for the area and was successful – we look forward to seeing this progress.

Road side verge campaign

One of the most visible aspects of the project was the sympathetic management of wildflower-rich road side verges and public meadows in Fermanagh with the prominent 'Do Not Cut Yet' signs erected between April and August, each year.

In partnership with Transport NI and Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, 15 of Northern Ireland's finest roadside verges are now left uncut till August each year and the campaign has been an incredible success.



Ely Lodge roadside verge in bloom

Delaying cutting from May till August allows wildflowers and pollinators to flourish and complete their life cycle. It also creates important green corridors between wildflower meadows, whilst raising awareness of the importance of these valuable wildlife refuges to a much wider audience.

Ely Lodge verge, on the Lough Shore Road, is now one of the most well-known roadside verges in Northern Ireland. Following enhancement with hay rattle seed and a radical change in management, it is now in superb condition and has featured in local papers, TV, social media, and as an exemplar on site visits by funders, businesses and other organisations.



Wildflower-rich roadside verge on Derrygonelly Road B81



Marlbank farmers visit to the Aran Islands and the Burren



Case Studies

David Johnston

Farmer, Lisbellaw

“My interest in restoring some meadow to its original glory brings me back to my childhood years of working on the farm and the way things were done then. You were in touch with nature, the sound of the corncrake in the meadow and then at the cutting of the hay, chasing the last ones out of the last swathes of grass. The sound of the plover and curlew, which were plentiful in the past, are now confined to small parts of our country as we have lost so much in our quest to become rich fast.

A few years ago, when talking to staff from Ulster Wildlife, I opted to restore some of my farmland as a meadow, which they sowed and helped me establish. The reward has been fantastic; lots of the old foliage has returned, yellow rattle, orchids, red clover, knapweed, forget-me-not, cuckoo flower and many other species of wildflowers.

This year, I have counted and photographed at least 12 different species of butterflies in abundance, not to mention moths and different bees, flies and birds that share this small habitat. This has been a project and a hobby I have found very satisfying and would encourage anyone, even with a small garden, to give it a go.”



Claire Maguire

Head of Biology at Mount Lourdes Grammar School, Enniskillen

“Having an active interest in conservation and sustainability, our school was delighted to work in partnership with Ulster Wildlife to promote ecological awareness for our students, both in their studies, but also through our extra-curricular activities.

Every year of the project, over 200 students from both Year 8 and 11 visited ‘Monastery Meadows’, which is based within our school grounds. All these pupils completed a ‘Meadow Habitat’ study, learning about systematic and random sampling of an area, with help from Ulster Wildlife.

Members of the Eco-committee also got involved in creating the ‘Hay Heads’ blog, named after the





two hay-rucks, Haylee and Baylee, which were created in Monastery meadow and participated in art-related activities exploring the importance of hay meadows for wildlife.



Members of our School Convent community benefitted from the 'harvest-time' event and got involved in hay-ruck making. This proved to be one of the most enjoyable experiences of the project, as those involved really enjoyed their trip down memory lane and it led to much interest in the local media. It has been a very rewarding learning experience for our students and staff and one which will have an untold impact for many years to come."



Anne Dyer

Green roof home-owner, Lough Erne



"I first became aware of 'Save Our Magnificent Meadows' two years ago, when my husband and I built two earth sheltered buildings near Lough Erne. I spotted a board on a roadside verge saying 'Do Not Cut Yet' and investigated.

It had always been our intention that the buildings should have a living roof, but at that stage we weren't sure how. I contacted Giles from Ulster Wildlife and between us a plan began to take shape. Giles provided us with seeds, mainly yellow rattle, and some meadow grasses and other wildflowers. He very kindly helped us sow the seeds and we waited anxiously to see what would come.

The results were amazing! The following spring, there was a carpet of hay rattle on the roof and also other traditional meadow flowers such as eyebright, self heal, ragged robin and knapweed. It wasn't without the odd interloper such as bindweed, so there was some maintenance required. Two years on and it is looking great, with an abundance of clover this year as well. The biggest joy is to see and hear the buzz of bees and other insects, and also to share it with other people. Seeds have been harvested and it's now cut back and resting, as we wait to see what comes next year!"





The Future of Grassland Conservation

While the three-year Save our Magnificent Meadows Project has now come to an end, Ulster Wildlife remains committed to the promotion of grassland conservation across Northern Ireland.

The legacy of the Save our Magnificent Meadows project is the empowerment, the knowledge and the wherewithal within the local community to create and look after their own meadows. Farmers have been instilled with pride for what they do and have the financial mechanisms and confidence in their own knowledge to ensure that they keep on managing meadows sympathetically, for years to come. Members of the local community from poets to Day Centre residents understand the importance of these special places for wildlife and schoolchildren's experiences with meadows on their doorstep will hopefully inspire them to take an active interest in their conservation.

We will continue to encourage others to draw up plans to conserve wildflower meadows on their land and co-ordinate events on their sites to engage the public with these hidden treasures and their wildlife, including supporting National Meadows Day.

We are also acting as a planner and facilitator for the Environmental Farming Scheme and many of our farmers will be encouraged to enter into the scheme to safeguard these sites into the future.

We will also seek to develop further projects and secure future grant funding to continue the important work started in the Save our Magnificent Meadows project.

Areas for Development

With the majority of species-rich grassland in private ownership, the future of species-rich grasslands will depend upon continuing to work with farmers and other land managers. In order to do this we need to influence and use farming subsidies to support sympathetic farming activity. There is a role to play for projects like Save our Magnificent Meadows to interpret, advise and encourage farmers that are unaware of, or unsure of, statutory guidance on appropriate management of species-rich grassland and help ensure the uptake of schemes are maximised.

However, there are also limitations to agri-environment schemes in Northern Ireland. While existing areas of habitat are eligible for funding, areas that used to be good quality habitat but have been lost or degraded are not eligible. Areas that might have been lost as a result

of scrubbing-over can become ineligible under existing farming schemes, discouraging farmers from undertaking restorative work. Targeted action on scrubbed over species-rich grassland can make land eligible once more, opening the door to new sources of funding and therefore removing financial hurdles to continuing to manage the land sympathetically.

There are still significant issues on the horizon with regards to the recruitment of younger farmers to manage our grassland habitats for the future. Currently there is a significant degree of abandonment of sites as the current farming generation gets older and these are in danger of scrubbing up. Future work needs to focus on engaging the younger generation of farmers to make the farming of species-rich grasslands attractive and also to train them to undertake management on this type of habitat sensitively.

A number of areas on public land can now be utilised as 'seed factories' where the community can collect seed themselves for free, but the next step must be to raise awareness of how to do this sustainably. Future work will facilitate this type of activity as well as empowering them to undertake restoration appropriately at home. Sympathetic management of gardens for species-rich grassland will also encourage other wildlife, to parks and gardens across the country.

Finally the project's exposure through the Road Verge Scheme and its successes restoring sites such as Ballynacor Lagoon and Lough Navar have meant that other public facing organisations have adopted the creation and restoration of species-rich grasslands, such as Marble Arch Caves and National Trust, which will flourish for years to come.





For further information visit
www.magnificentmeadows.org.uk or
www.ulsterwildlife.org

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