



Barn Owl. Photo, Tony House (www.seeing.org)



Banded demoiselle. Photo, Neil Bygrave



Dormouse. Photo, Hugh Clark



Devil's-bit scabious

What is Culm grassland?

Culm grasslands are wet grasslands that have remained unchanged by modern intensive agricultural practice. They were first created by the clearance of woodland and scrub, expanding the size of naturally formed clearings grazed by wild and domestic animals.

The Culm is characterised by poorly draining clay soils, a product of the underlying geology of shales, slates and sandstones. When this is coupled with a mild and wet climate, conditions are right to sustain Culm grassland.

Culm grassland is a rich wildlife resource because it includes a mixture of different habitats including wet heath, rush pasture, mire and swamp. Culm commonly exists alongside other important habitats including wet woodland, scrub and hay meadows.

Why is Culm grassland important?

This habitat is unique to Devon and Cornwall and only 5,000 hectares remain. Culm grassland supports a wealth of wildlife. Much of this wildlife is under threat from changes in farming practice, especially where land is either abandoned or has been agriculturally improved.

A rich Culm environment helps provide other benefits to us all. Water quality in the catchments of the Culm's three principal rivers (Torrige, Taw and Tamar) is improved by the presence of wet grasslands. These areas act as huge filters capturing soils and nutrients before they reach rivers and reservoirs. The effects of flood and drought are also reduced - wetlands absorb water in periods of high rainfall and release it slowly during times of drought.



Rush pasture



Southern marsh orchid

The wildlife of the Culm

The characteristic grass species which thrives within most Culm grasslands is purple moor-grass (locally known as 'white-grass'). A wide variety of other rough grasses, sedges and rushes are also supported which together form this unique habitat.

Orchids are common in these grasslands with typical species including heath-spotted and southern marsh orchids, along with rarities such as the lesser butterfly orchid. Other distinctive Culm plants include the scarce whorled caraway, wavy St John's-wort and bog asphodel.

During spring and summer months Culm grasslands come alive with insect activity. Of these the marsh fritillary is most characteristic. However, this nationally scarce species has experienced a population decline of 60% since 1990. The Culm area remains a stronghold with more than 35 known populations. Other scarce butterfly species include the small pearl-bordered fritillary and wood white. Culm wetlands also support a wealth of dragonfly life. Golden-ringed dragonflies and banded demoiselles are often seen near flowing water, while keeled skimmers are more at home in bogs and small pools.



Marsh fritillary. Photo, Kevin New



Otter. Photo, Hugh Clark

The winter heralds an influx of wading birds to Culm grasslands. At this time of year wet rushy pasture supports hundreds of roosting and feeding snipe, while field and woodland margins become home to woodcock. Patches of woodland and scrub support nationally important populations of willow tit, a species that has experienced significant declines in recent decades. Wet valley mires form an important home to another characteristic bird, the reed bunting.

Culm grasslands are also home to some important mammal species. Otters frequent the Culm's network of ponds, pools, rivers and streams, while dormice are found in nationally significant numbers within the landscape's hedgerows, scrub and native woodlands.

Culm grassland supports a range of breeding and over-wintering birds, including several notable species. Some of the last remaining breeding curlew in Devon use Culm grasslands to nest and raise their young. Barn owls are frequently seen hunting over rough grassland for their small mammal prey.



Curlew. Photo, Peter Beasley