

# Isle of Wight Biodiversity Action Plan

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## HABITAT ACTION PLANS.....

In the second half of last year, the Steering Group discussed the priorities for drawing up Habitat Action Plans. Three habitats were selected for 2001 - **Calcareous Grasslands, Wetlands, and Maritime Cliffs and Slopes**. Here we give a brief overview of the extent, distribution and importance of each habitat, together with some of the challenges and opportunities they present.

Funding to write the plans has come from English Nature, the Environment Agency and Island 2000. The Isle of Wight Council is providing technical and administrative back-up.

### Maritime Cliffs and Slopes

The island's 53 km of maritime cliffs represent around 35% of the South-east's resource, and they have national geological and ecological significance.

The habitats which develop on them are very varied, and are related to soil type, ground stability and water availability. They frequently support rich and specialised plant and animal communities, with species on the northern limit of their range. In particular, the Glanville Fritillary is associated with the cliffs from Compton Bay to Redcliff. There are many other rare invertebrates which depend on the combination of crumbly soils, springs, seepages, pools and high surface temperatures to provide suitable micro-habitats.

The chalk cliffs at both the western and eastern

ends of the island provide habitats for significant populations of breeding seabirds.

Although from a nature conservation viewpoint these mobile habitats are best left to evolve naturally, complex challenges are presented by the issues of coastal protection and managing public access.

### Calcareous grassland

The Island's 653 ha of chalk grassland contributes about 10% of the south-east regional total. It covers about 16% of the Island's land surface and is one of the most distinctive features of our landscape. In addition, there are interesting small fragments found on outcrops of Bembridge Limestone. The best chalk grassland is on the steep scarp slopes where either grazing or coastal exposure has prevented the succession to scrub. Many of these areas are protected by international or national nature conservation designations, and the remainder are locally important.

Location of Calcareous Grassland

The chalk downland flora including early gentians, pyramidal orchids, rockroses, dwarf thistles and butterflies such as adonis blue, chalk hill blue and Duke of Burgundy fritillary are some of the more colourful species to be found here. In addition, there are many other species of rare invertebrates and rich assemblages of lichens.

The main threat to the continued existence of the chalk grasslands is related to the change in grazing levels as a result of economic problems within the farming industry related to the viability of raising stock. Also recreational pressures are increasing, and the use of scrambling bikes on the long-distance trails is causing considerable erosion.

The **Wetlands** Habitat Action Plan will include fens, swamps, marshes, reedbed and grazing marshes. The Eastern and Western Yar valleys have the greatest concentration of these sites, but many have been unsuitably managed or unmanaged in the past. The greatest number of extinctions in the last 200 years have been associated with these habitats. Management of watercourses by drainage and river engineering have modified the resource considerably, and there is also the risk of damage by intensive agricultural practices.

It is difficult to quantify the resource as there are a number of diverse habitats which are sorted by different vegetation types. For example, reedbed is a habitat which is dominated by common reed; the habitat may be wet or dry and it may be fresh or saline. It may become established on fens or marshes, usually as a result of lack of management. There are 77.8 ha of reedbed which constitutes 1.5% of the national resource; however, few of these areas are good quality as most have arisen from reed colonising other habitats of value. Species of importance in reedbed include the birds Reed Bunting, Reed Warbler, Water Rail, and Cetti's Warbler, and the moths Silky Wainscot and Reed Dagger.

Location of Wetland Habitats

**Biodiversity in Action .....**

### ***Biodiversity people.....***

***Jonathan Cox, a freelance ecological consultant with a wide experience of the island's natural history has been appointed by the Biodiversity Action Plan Steering Group to produce the first set of Habitat Action Plans, due to be published towards the end of 2001.***

Jonathan was born on the Isle of Wight and educated at Gurnard Primary School and Cowes High School. After completing a degree at King's College, London he returned to the Island to work in nature conservation, first as a volunteer for the National Trust and then for the Nature Conservancy Council (now known as English Nature), carrying out survey work on SSSIs and preparing an Ancient Woodland Inventory. Following this, he became a Conservation Officer for South and East Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, dealing with conservation of protected areas and the identification, designation and management of nationally and internationally important wildlife sites.

Since 1992 he has been a freelance ecological consultant, working throughout England and also in Eastern Europe. He has retained his interest in the Island, by involvement in the Steering Group of the Woodland Forum and in writing the Isle of Wight Natural Area document for English Nature. He also manages Briddlesford Copse.

He has been involved with Biodiversity Action Plans at a national level, as the technical advisor for to the UK Chalk Rivers BAP, and on the near mainland with the Calcareous grassland and Water-dependent habitats BAPs for Hampshire.

## **Cricket on the Downs**

In 1991, English Nature and the Invertebrate Conservation Centre at London Zoo embarked on a project with entomologists and landowners to save the Field Cricket (*Gryllus campestris*) from extinction in Britain.

The decline of the species has been largely due to destruction or neglect of its habitat. Agricultural activities or scrub invasion have reduced the areas of south-facing slopes of open ground with short swards and bare earth. In 1991, this species was known from a single site, a cricket pitch in West Sussex, where the population had been conserved by careful management and monitoring. The steep, sunny bank that the crickets used was mown, and areas of bare earth exposed to create a short sward was warm enough to keep the small colony going. This site and the management, however, made the status of the species in Britain extremely precarious and it was thought that historical sites should be looked at with a view to re-introducing them elsewhere in the country.

Field Crickets have been bred in captivity in a number of zoos and, after some initial problems with disease, have been released on a number of sites in Sussex, Surrey and Hampshire, with varying degrees of success.

In 1995 Mike Edwards, an entomologist working for English Nature, visited the Isle of Wight to see if any areas would be suitable for release of the species here. The species is mentioned in Morey's 'Guide to the Natural History of the Isle of Wight' but no location is given. Subsequent searches of the literature showed that the Field Cricket had been recorded on the Isle of Wight in the 1930's but that it had become extinct. However the site of Arreton Down looked very suitable and it was agreed that the next release would take place there.

In early 1999, Wight Wildlife approached the owner to see if he would allow a release of young crickets (nymphs) on to the Down. He agreed and in August of that year, 500 were released onto the downs. The following summer, from May onwards, Field Crickets

### **Local Agenda 21 Strategy launched**

could be heard singing on the Isle of Wight for the first time in 50 years.

Since this time the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust have acquired the site as a nature reserve. This excellent example of agriculturally unimproved chalk grassland is a showcase for the importance of the conservation of this nationally rare habitat and a priority for the Island. What is more it holds a valuable population of a very rare insect, brought back from extinction by the co-operation of volunteers, conservation professionals and landowners working in partnership to enhance the Island's biodiversity.

**Richard Grogan**  
**Wight Wildlife Officer**

### **Practical Skills .....Hedge laying**

*The annual FWAG hedge laying competition will take place on Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> February 2001, from 10am to 3pm along Whitcombe Road just north of Whitecroft.*

*This competition, which requires the entrants to lay an 11 yard section of hedge, has run for 9 years and aims to promote the skills of hedge laying of both novices and professionals. This year there will be a new category of "team entry", for teams of 2 or 3, only one of whom should be experienced. They will have the same length of hedge to lay, but they will not be marked for speed.*

*Further details from Matthew Chatfield on 01983 823892*

On December 15<sup>th</sup> the Island Agenda 21

Strategy was formally presented at 10 Downing Street by three young Islanders, Daniel Barnes, Holly Fletcher and Helen Bishop, meeting the deadline set by Tony Blair in June 1997, that all UK local authorities would produce their own Strategy by the end of 2000.

Daniel Holly and Helen played a key role in the development of the Strategy. They were the mainstay of the Roadshows which visited 10 towns and villages and various rural locations between September 1999 and March 2000. Local people were able to have their say about the future of the Island, recorded by the team to produce the *Island Voices* video.

In total 1,691 Islanders gave their views and over 200 signed up for the four Special Interest Groups - Environmental Stewardship; Sustainable Economy; Sustainable Transport; Sustainable Resource Management. Each of these groups considered the results of the public consultation and developed an overall strategic vision and action plan related to their group's specific area of interest.

The Biodiversity Action Plan will be most directly related to the Environmental Stewardship theme, which has these aims

An island where

- *the countryside and open spaces remain rich in wildlife and natural beauty*
- *the coast, beaches and marine environment are free of pollution and remain naturally beautiful*
- *commercial and residential development enhances the social and economic life of the Island and respects and protects the natural environment*
- *the local environment, culture, heritage, and civic pride of our towns and villages are maintained and protected*

The priorities for the first year's action are

- *The provision of a comprehensive countryside interpretation service for both residents and tourists*

- *To consider increasing the area of AONB to cover the whole area of the Isle of Wight which currently lies outside development envelopes.*
- *To develop the Island as a centre for sustainable resource and environmental management*
- *To work with local businesses and communities to develop strategies for the local management of litter which should include: a litter bin survey, litter audits at schools, and local campaigns targeting specific "hotspots"*
- *Lobby central government to introduce more stringent controls and penalties on manufacturers for packaging generated.*

Copies of the Island Agenda 21 Strategy can be obtained from Angela Mawle, Agenda 21 and Health Alliance Officer, Seaclose Offices, Fairlee Road, Newport or ☎ 01983 823865

*This newsletter is produced for the Isle of Wight Biodiversity Action Plan Steering Group by The Countryside Section of the Isle of Wight Council*