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MANAGING URBAN GREEN SPACE FOR WILDLIFE

Formal and informal grass



Grass in urban green space is very important for wildlife.

No public open space would be complete without an area of grass. For people, it provides a focal point of recreation and relaxation – a place to sit, walk or play. Large areas of grass provide the feeling of freedom and release from the often-enclosed areas nearby.

For wildlife, grass is an often over-managed and undervalued resource. Yet in many parks and green spaces, opportunities exist where, with a little imagination, significant benefits and contributions can be made for wildlife without detracting from the visual appeal of the site.

BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

- Grass is particularly important for a variety of wildlife. It provides shelter, somewhere to hunt, feed and breed.
- Longer swards help retain humidity and soil moisture, which benefits many varieties of invertebrates such as worms, beetles, butterflies, grasshoppers, crickets and spiders, living at or just below the soil surface.
- Longer grass allows plants, such as buttercups, dandelions and bristly ox-tongues to flower and provides valuable nectar for insects such as bees and hoverflies. Invertebrates living in and on shrubs will feed from flowers in the adjacent grass or prey on others coming to nectar.
- Grass is the larval food for many species of invertebrates such as butterflies and moths, which require grass for egg laying and over wintering as eggs, pupae or larvae to complete their life cycles.
- Intermediate and long grass beneath trees and adjacent to shrubs benefits invertebrates that feed in the trees and bushes and need to pupate in the grass to complete their life cycle.
- Long grass provides shelter for flying insects, during rain or sudden changes in temperature and also as an overnight roost.
- Starlings and thrushes that feed on soil invertebrates prefer short swards so they can easily find food and detect approaching predators. House sparrows and finches prefer longer vegetation where larger invertebrates and more seeds from plants such as annual meadow grass and plantains are available.
- Mammals feed on grassland seeds and invertebrates. Reptiles and amphibians will also search for invertebrates in grass and use it as shelter when moving between sites.

GUIDELINES OVERLEAF

KEY SPECIES

A wide range of species use grass, including: **House sparrow** feeds on seeds and invertebrates in *intermediate* and *long grass*.

Starling feeds on invertebrates in *short* and *intermediate grass*.

Song thrush feeds on invertebrates in *short grass*, near or adjacent to thick cover.

Meadow brown butterfly uses sheltered sunny areas with *intermediate* and *long grass*,

containing fine grasses and flowers. Eggs are laid on grasses and pupate among stems and thatch.

Large yellow underwing moth likes wide range of grass types, from *short* to *long*. Caterpillars feed on the roots of grasses and other plants.

Dark arches moth prefers *long grass* in which to breed. Caterpillars feed on the roots of grasses and other plants.

Bumblebees will benefit from areas of undisturbed long grass where they can nest in thatch on the ground or in abandoned rodent burrows.

Meadow grasshopper uses *intermediate* to *long grass* in sheltered sunny positions, laying their eggs just below the surface of the soil among grass roots.

HOW CAN I MANAGE INFORMAL AND FORMAL GRASS FOR WILDLIFE?

- Structure is crucial – provide a variety of sward lengths.
- Create a range of short, intermediate and long grass throughout a site.
- Remove cuttings, particularly from intermediate and long grass to prevent build up of thatch and damage to the sward.
- Inform users (eg through interpretative signs) of the wildlife benefits of longer grass.

Long grass (150-450 mm)

- Sheltered sunny margins, 'dead' corners and against informal shrub beds are ideal areas to retain long grass.
- Grown against informal shrub beds, long grass increases humidity beneath the bushes, by buffering them from drying winds.
- Leave areas of long grass over winter, cutting in late March or early April of the following spring. The first cut should be no shorter than 150 mm to avoid killing any insects in the thatch beneath.

- Cut if necessary until late May, depending on weather conditions. Stop earlier if it is very dry or later if it is wet. Leave to grow then until the following spring.
- Late summer cuts in August and early September may be required, particularly following a wet growing season. Afterwards, leave to grow through the winter.
- Where possible, create areas of undisturbed grassland, cutting on a two – or three year cycle, allowing plants to flower and seed. To improve success, a minimum area of 10 m² is desirable, preferably adjacent to a hedge or shrub bed.
- Provide good nectar sources in adjacent flower and shrub beds or encourage wildflowers within the sward.

Intermediate grass (50-150 mm)

- In public areas with less intense use, longer grass can be encouraged.
- Maintain a 'managed' look near paths by mowing a 1-2 m strip of short grass between the path and the intermediate grass.

Short grass (35-50 mm)

- Aside from recognised sports areas, look to reduce the frequency of cutting for short grass, allowing a slightly longer sward to develop.

Flower meadows

- They are generally small remnants of old semi-improved grassland or have been specifically created and often include rare or unusual plants.
- No matter how small, they should be managed using traditional practices to retain their diverse flora and invertebrate fauna.
- High soil nutrients often make it difficult and costly to successfully create species-rich meadows. A combination of methods is likely to be required, with no general prescription applicable to any one site. Specialist advice should be sought.

KEY POINTS

- **Structure is important – maintain a variety of sward lengths across a site.**
- **Longer grass is valuable to a wide range of invertebrates and provides insects and seeds for birds to eat.**
- **Maintain long grass over winter and where possible cut on a two – to three year rotation.**
- **Remove arisings, especially after cutting intermediate and long grass.**
- **Plant good nectar sources nearby either in formal flower and shrub beds or by encouraging areas with wildflowers.**

See also the RSPB advisory sheets on:

- Managing urban green space for wildlife – poster leaflet
- Formal and informal shrub bed and flower border management

You can get further information on this and other ways of managing your land for wildlife from:



The RSPB, UK Headquarters,
The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire,
SG19 2DL
01767 680551 www.rspb.org.uk



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Butterfly Conservation, ManorYard, East
Lulworth, Wareham, Dorset, BH20 5QP
01929 400209
www.butterfly-conservation.org



Buglife – The Invertebrate Conservation
Trust, First Floor, 90 Bridge Street North,
Peterborough, PE1 1DY 01733 201210
www.buglife.org.uk



PLANTLIFE

Plantlife, 14 Rolleston Street,
Salisbury, Wiltshire, SP1 1DX
01722 342730 www.plantlife.org.uk

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Sarah Niemann (RSPB)
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