



HABITAT BIODIVERSITY AUDIT
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Warwick Racecourse
SP26S1

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 Date(s): 13/6/11

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Location: SP273847
 Local Authority: Warwick District Council

Boundary of pLWS:



Local Wildlife Sites Evaluation Form

Site Name: Warwick Racecourse	Site Ref: SP26 S1	Grid Ref: SP273647
Local Authority Area: Warwick DC	Date Selected: 02/11/2011	
Site description:	Suitably managed: Yes	Area: 23.21 ha
<p>The LWS comprises a large area of unenclosed fairly level semi-improved grassland within the southern half of Warwick Racecourse, immediately south of the golf course and west of the town. Historically it formed part of Warwick (or St Mary's) Common, also known as Lammass Fields; and was traditionally roughly grazed by commoners animals, but was also used for recreation by the townsfolk. Racing began here during the 18th century with the first stand built in 1808. With the cessation of grazing the grassland was often managed in the post-war years by intensive mowing which presumably lowered species diversity considerably. In recent years increasingly large areas of grassland have been left unmown at least during the summer months and former sports pitches on the west side have been sown with wildflower mixes.</p> <p>Early 19th century plant records suggest that the common was quite wet in the more low-lying parts and today there is still an area of wet and dry rush pasture with a small pond and spring situated towards the southern end of the LWS. This fenced area is embanked and used as a storm water retention area to help with drainage on the racecourse. Much of the LWS is around 50-55m ASL, but the height gently increases towards the north-east to a low knoll situated just over 60m ASL. This hill is of local historical importance as it was here or close by that the vanished medieval hamlet of <i>Levenhull</i> was situated and part of the ridge-and-furrow open field system is still clearly visible on the north side of the LWS. This knoll is now crowned by a small plantation.</p> <p>The underlying geology consists of non-calcareous Keuper Marl and associated clays. The area is drained by two streams flowing south to the R.Avon which form the boundaries of the racecourse, but not of the LWS. These create local wildlife corridors, with the eastern brook also containing some minor associated wetland habitats. Beyond the racecourse the land is now wholly urban or suburban on three sides but to the west there is still a network of small to medium grass and arable fields. To the north of the LWS is a golf course with a large mixed plantation and small balancing reservoir beyond, all of which contribute to the diversity of habitats in the local area.</p> <p><u>Grassland</u></p> <p>Most of the LWS consists of neutral semi-improved grassland which is dominated by a mix of typical grasses such as Meadow Foxtail, Sweet Vernal-grass, Yorkshire Fog, Meadow Barley, Perennial Ryegrass, Timothy and Smooth Meadow-grass, but with False Oat-grass becoming increasingly dominant in areas which have not been mown for some time. The most diverse swards occur in the better drained areas such as on the ridge-and-furrow, where Common Bent, Red Fescue and Smaller Catstail are dominant, with locally frequent Crested Dogstail in places. The variety of forbs in these areas is still not great but both diversity and abundance are increasing annually through the cessation of summer mowing. Both Meadow and Bulbous Buttercups are now abundant, while both Common Knapweed and Lady's Bedstraw are frequent on the ridge-and-furrow and on the banks around the wet grassland. Other more locally frequent species include Yarrow, Common Mouse-ear, Pignut, Common Catsear, Field Wood-rush, Ribwort Plantain, Creeping Cinquefoil, Selfheal, Common Sorrel, Goatsbeard and Red Clover, with occasional</p>		

Yellow Rattle. In some areas of tall longer-standing False Oat-grass such as along the northern boundary with the golf course and at the southern end, there has been recent tall herb invasion with abundant Cow Parsley and frequent Hogweed, Creeping Thistle and other species.

The most diverse area of grassland is the recently seeded former sports field situated on the western side of the LWS. Here the herbs include abundant Yarrow, Common Knapweed, Hedge Bedstraw and Oxeye Daisy, with frequent Lady's Bedstraw, Common Birdsfoot-trefoil, Ragged Robin, Yellow Rattle and occasional Field Scabious.

A further area of until recently close mown grassland to the north of the present football pitches is also now becoming more diverse possibly due to seeding, with occasional-locally frequent Yarrow, Agrimony, Common Knapweed, Common Mouse-ear, Hedge and Lady's Bedstraws, Common Birdsfoot-trefoil, Ribwort Plantain, Meadow Buttercup and Red Clover all noted.

The grassland is hard to classify using the NVC (National Vegetation Classification) but may have resembled MG4 (Meadow Foxtail-Great Burnet community) originally. Great Burnet (*Poterium sanguisorba*) is still present in one spot in the north-western corner of the racecourse (and outside the LWS). Parts of the present grassland now show affinities to both MG5 (Crested Dogstail-Common Knapweed community) and MG6 (Perennial Ryegrass-Crested Dogstail community), but with MG1 (False Oat-grass dominant community) now becoming widespread.

Rush Pasture and Wetland

This area of wet grassland enclosed by low bunds at the southern end of the LWS probably contains the last relict vegetation from the former common. Here the ground is dominated by Creeping Bent, Marsh Foxtail, Meadow Foxtail, Hairy Sedge, Yorkshire Fog, Soft Rush and Creeping Buttercup, with Red Fescue in the dryer areas. More occasional species here includes Lady's Smock, Glaucous Sedge, Tufted Hair-grass, Compact Rush, Hard Rush, Meadow Vetchling, Field Wood-rush and Lesser Stitchwort.

The pond despite its small size is very diverse, with a marginal swamp containing Hop Sedge, Great Willowherb, Meadowsweet, Yellow Iris, Purple Loosestrife, Reed Canary-grass, Common Reed and Common Reedmace, and an abundant submerged growth of Rigid Hornwort. Marginal plants here and in the nearby drain contains Fool's Watercress, Lesser Water-parsnip, False Fox-sedge, Hoary Willowherb, Common Duckweed, Water Mint, Water Forgetmenot, Redshank, Lesser Spearwort, Celery-leaved Buttercup, Clustered Dock and Brooklime.

A small plantation of trees on the knoll at the north-east corner of the LWS is not of any significance though it provides some cover for nesting birds. The trees are fairly young and around 6-7m tall, with dominant Ash and a sprinkling of Sycamore, Norway Maple, Silver Birch, Beech, Pedunculate Oak, Rowan and Scots Pine. Apart from sparse Ash and Sycamore regeneration the only shrub layer is an area of fairly dense Snowberry in the centre of the plantation. The field layer is dominated by Cow Parsley, with local areas of Ivy.

Fauna

The unmown summer grassland is now locally important for its ground breeding birds, including probably 10-12 pairs of Skylarks and four pairs of Meadow Pipits, both of which have increased in recent years. Both Common Whitethroat and Reed Bunting breed annually at the pond, while Grasshopper and Sedge Warblers have also occurred there. Yellow Wagtails feed regularly on the mown areas during the summer and Hobbys are regular visitors. Other annual passage migrants include Wheatear and Whinchat, while Green Sandpiper, Redshank and Tree Pipit have also been seen recently. A few Snipe occur in the rush pasture during winter.

The grassland holds good populations of butterflies and moths, including Common Blue, Small Copper and Burnet-moth.

Phase 1 Habitats present: Semi-improved grassland, rush pasture and pond. Small area of mixed but mainly native deciduous plantation.

Evaluation against the criteria

Habitat criteria applied: Grassland and marsh

SCIENTIFIC CRITERIA	Elements of the criteria applying to the site						COMMUNITY CRITERIA	Elements of the criteria applying to the site				
	1	2	3	4	5	6		1	2	3	4	5
Diversity	√	√	√	√			Physical & Visual Access	√	√		√	
Rarity	√						Educational Value					
Size	√						Community & Amenity Value	√	√	√		
Naturalness	√						Aesthetic Appeal & Landscape	√	√	√	√	
Fragility	√	√					Geographical Position		√			
Typicalness	√	√					Recorded History	√	√	√		
Ecological Position			√				Continuity of Landuse	√	√	√		
Significant Populations												
Potential Value	√											

Why this site qualifies as a Local Wildlife Site: summary of assessment

Warwick Racecourse qualifies as a Local Wildlife Site with 13 scientific and 17 community criteria applying, of which the following are considered to be the most important.

Diversity

The LWS contains several different grassland types ranging from relatively diverse semi-improved neutral grassland resembling MG4 or MG5 communities (NVC) to damp rush pasture and MG1 and tall herb communities with low diversity. These areas hold many typical herbs and grasses including Meadow Foxtail, Sweet Vernal-grass, Crested Dogstail, Common Knapweed, Lady's Bedstraw and Yarrow. There is also a pond and adjacent marginal swamp, while wet ditches and dry banks add further variety. The grassland is locally important for invertebrates and nesting birds, including a small colony of the county uncommon Meadow Pipit.

Rarity

Such a large area of unenclosed semi-improved grassland is unusual in the county. It is a county important site for breeding Meadow Pipts, while county notable or uncommon plants include Lesser Water-parsnip, Hop Sedge, Field Scabious, Ragged Robin, Lesser Spearwort and Yellow Rattle, although two of these (Field Scabious and Ragged Robin) were probably introduced with

wildflower seed.

Fragility

The survival and continued improvement in species diversity within the grassland will depend on continued sensitive management. This should include an annual autumn cut in more diverse sections, but leaving some blocks of grassland over winter for ground feeding and roosting birds such as owls, which are rotated for mowing every two years to prevent the spread of tall herb and scrub. Ground breeding birds are at risk from visitor pressure, particularly from unleashed dogs, and preferably some areas should be temporarily fenced and sign-posted during the spring and summer.

Ecological Position

Although the site is fairly isolated from other areas of semi-improved grassland, it is connected to other local habitats via the stream corridors on the eastern and western boundaries of the racecourse.

Potential Value

Through continued management there is scope for creating blocks of both MG4 and MG5 grassland, both of which are threatened habitats in Warwickshire. Some small scrapes in the rush pasture area would encourage more wetland birds to use the site.

Physical and Visual Access

The LWS is crisscrossed with public footpaths and the whole area is of open access, and is heavily used for recreation by local townspeople. There are extensive views across the racecourse from the high ground in the town to the east, but the stands and enclosures partly block views from the Hampton Road to the south.

Community and Amenity Value

The site is an important recreational resource for the people of Warwick and the whole of St. Mary's Lands play an important part in the local and racing communities, as well as in the history of the town.

Recorded History

Botanical records for the site go back almost 200 years with the publication of a county list by William Perry (1817), later curator at the museum in Warwick.

Continuity of Landuse

The LWS has been under permanent pasture or grassland for many centuries, although the presence of ridge-and-furrow shows that the northern part of the site was under cultivation until at least the 14th century.

Sources of Information :		Recorder Site No:	Ecosite No: 15/26
Survey Details:			Location of records (HBA / WWT / WBRC / EN / Other)
Date:	Survey Type:	Surveyors:	
16/5 and 13/7/11 6 and 8/8/07	Phase 2	J J Bowley	HBA/WSP
	Phase 2	J J Bowley	
8/6/01 June-July 1997	Phase 1	M Smith	HBA
	Phase 1	S Rufus et al	
	General records		WBRC
<p>Any Other Information:</p> <p>The remainder of the racecourse including St Mary's Lands Plantation to the north is not considered to be currently of LWS quality and will remain as a pLWS. There is a possibility of wildflower meadow creation on the golf course in future.</p> <p>The probably non-native Autumn Crocus (<i>Crocus nudiflorus</i>) has been established on the race course in one of only two extant county sites, since at least 1812, but has apparently declined in recent years. It is thought now only to occur on the north-eastern side of the racecourse (outside the LWS) and a survey is needed to determine the current status.</p> <p>Plot's Elm (<i>Ulmus plotii</i>) is now confined in the county to one possible tree in the north-western corner of the racecourse near the reservoir (and again outside the LWS). This needs to be critically examined as a hybrid is suspected.</p>			
Completed By: J J Bowley Date: 18/10/11		Map attached: Yes Species list attached: Yes	
<p>Passed by Sites Selection Panel: Yes / No / Further survey required: (circle as appropriate)</p> <p>Signed: candidate Wildlife Site Date:</p>			