Survey report

Survey dates: 30/06/2010 and 01&02/07/2010

Of the eight fields which were surveyed, seven (Fields 13,14,15,17, 18a, 18b and 19) were found to contain UK Biodiversity Action Plan **high priority grassland habitat - Lowland Meadow**. This habitat is extremely rare, with over 90% of it's overall area having been lost in England since the 1940's - mostly due to agricultural intensification, neglect and urban development. Our project is committed to identifying, expanding and connecting these precious wildflower meadows.

(The lines on the map representing boundaries between the different fields were taken from previous habitat surveys)

Fields 13, 14 and 15, being more or less contiguous - Hawkesbury Common split into 3 by the 2 tracks - can be taken together. They all were found to contain a very wide range of species, with field 15 on lower ground in the north west recorded as having a slightly greater abundance of Lowland meadow wildflower indicator species. All of the fields, however, had records of abundant creeping thistle and varieties of rush which, if left unchecked, will over time, out-compete the more precarious lowland meadow specialists.

For Inglestone Common, although the fields are similarly almost contiguous, they exhibited different characteristics.

Field 17 was recorded as the wettest part of the common - with records of floating sweet grass and brooklime and abundant rushes along the damp flush. The northern most tip exhibited less species diversity than the rest of the field, with rye grass and white clover dominant.
Field 18b was slightly more species rich than the others, but was still recorded as having frequent creeping thistle in the sward. The eastern end was noted to have more disturbed ground and more invasive weeds - possibly as a result of previous scrub management.
Field 18a was overall damper, with outcrops of rushes and other damp loving species, but still with patches of drier neutral grassland, becoming noticeably less species rich around the edges. The thistle issues were very apparent here also, with creeping thistle and marsh thistle being abundant.
Field 19 with fewer indicator species, also had a mix of dry and damp parts and there was evidence of scrub clearance where aggressive ruderals had flourished in the disturbed ground - brambles, nettles and creeping thistles.

Field 20, according to our survey methodology was not adjudged to be of the highest quality priority grassland and was therefore recorded as 'semi-improved'. The field had previously been surveyed (at least as long ago as 2004) and recorded as Lowland Calcareous grassland, but our surveyors recorded no specialist calcicolous species. This is not to say they were not there, but it is also not unusual for flatter, damper areas of semi-natural grassland to become more of a lowland meadow - type habitat, as one of the basic characteristics of lowland calcareous grassland is a nutrient - poor soil, which more often occurs on steeper, drier sections of the land. The field exhibited frequent, abundant creeping thistle, which, if left unchecked will also out-compete the nutrient poor specialists, with the die-off rotting down and increasing the fertility of the soil.

Conclusion

The two commons are, in general, great examples of species rich grassland - Lowland Meadow. In our opinion, the issue of controlling the widespread creeping thistle and other invasive species across both commons should be the main feature of management over the next few years.

Our mutual colleague Mark Smith from FWAG has, we understand, undertaken the process of completing a Higher Level Stewardship Application on behalf of the landowner, and we therefore confidently assume that a positive future for the extensive grassland habitats on both the Commons is assured.