

**Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> July 2006 : CMA Study Day at Crickley Hill Country Park, Gloucestershire. 10.00am – 4.00pm**

**“Conservation grazing of SSSI limestone grasslands for wildlife, people and profit”**



Crickley Hill Country Park is the fourteenth largest area of unimproved limestone grassland (NVC CG 5 – Tor grass and Upright Brome) in Gloucestershire, part owned by the National Trust and Gloucestershire County Council managed by Julian Bendle and his team. The SSSI supports an enormous number of different plants and animals, including nationally rare species. Last year the site, which includes a large Hill Fort and a Scheduled Ancient Monument, attracted more than 300,000 visitors. The park is also a common, ring fenced by the Council under a section 194 agreement, argued on the need for grazing to maintain the open nature of the site. The area was burnt previously (as little as 30 – 40 years ago on some Cotswolds commons) to encourage spring bite for livestock, but which may have encouraged Tor grass dominance. Historically the site was quarried and there are still remnants of old lime kilns.

The aim of the study day was to look at how these grasslands have been managed over the past 20 years at this heavily used recreational site. The majority of the day was spent outside looking at practical issues:

1. Focusing on the successes and failures over the last 11 years since the reintroduction of grazing:
  - Started with grazier sheep from Wales but dog attacks became too problematic
  - Then English Nature sheep flock within electric fences, but again problems
  - Then Welsh Mountain ponies from the upper Wye valley – these were very hardy and did a very good job with management of the sward and involved no problems with dogs. Unfortunately the owner moved away
  - Then English Nature / National Trust joint Welsh Black and Belted Galloway cattle herd
  - Belted Galloway herd remains on site or in the area all year, grazing different areas throughout the year
  - There is no supplementary feeding
  - No noticeable grazing differences between Welsh Blacks and Galloways, either in where they go or what they eat, though the Welsh Blacks have better temperament

***Tips:***

1. Assess the risks of site grazing for livestock: Refer to GAPs Welfare Risk Assessment for livestock in the Guide to Animal Welfare in Nature Conservation Grazing, available to download from [www.grazinganimalsproject.org](http://www.grazinganimalsproject.org)
2. Involve the RSPCA and vet in developing your grazing policy / system

## 2. Scrub management:

- 15 + years of persistent, consistent scrub management (not eradication) by the Cotswolds AONB voluntary wardens. Originally this was all hand work with bow saws and loppers but now staff follow up their work with chainsaws and treat with Roundup biactive
- Initial mistake was to leave mature scrub...this is the seed source for encroachment in to grassland areas, so now this is coppiced (the intention is not to try to return these areas to open limestone grassland)
- Grazing actually encourages scrub encroachment as it creates seed haps (previously thatch suppressed this)
- Other scrub management techniques can be used where appropriate: goats, machinery, flails, complete removal of bushes etc
- Grazing helps with some scrub management but would have to push animals very hard to force them to eat scrub, so not done

## 3. Butterfly monitoring

Drawing on the results of ten years of butterfly recording to discuss the use of Butterfly monitoring as a guide to grazing success, Julian uses the programme Transect walker. His thorough records, combined with management records, allows him to analyse trends in key species (for example in Chalkhill Blue) to see if they relate to any changes in his management. It is important to compare to local, regional and national changes / trends to analyse whether any change has been influenced by outside factors, not just at Crickley Hill.

This type of monitoring is time consuming and perhaps now if starting a monitoring scheme he would concentrate on vegetation monitoring as a priority. The main transect work is now carried out by Butterfly Conservation volunteers, and there is the possibility that they could use timed counts for butterflies as a quicker alternative monitoring technique.

Butterfly Conservation is using Crickley Hill to assess what is happening with the Small Heath butterfly, a widespread and common species that has suffered recent large declines (the House Sparrow of the Butterfly world?)

## 4. Looking at the role of GAP [Grazing Animals Project] in the South

## 5. The last part of the day was looking at the work of the jointly managed National Trust and English Nature conservation grazing project, including finishing of animals and marketing of the meat:

- Joint EN and NT herd, 35 Belted Galloways, 25 Welsh Blacks managed by Matt Stanway
- Bulls hired in
- Objectives are habitat management and demonstration to other landowners and farmers (for example commoners in other areas in the Cotswolds are now running rare and native breed stock that they market through box schemes – quite a change in attitude from a few years ago)
- Freedom food registered (a NT policy for all in hand stock)
- Has a three year, costed grazing / business plan
- All stock bucket trained from an early age for ease of rounding up and moving
- Graze 150 hectares of high biodiversity, limestone grassland
- Run as two separate herds (to help with TB control) with each having its own holding number and sites linked under a Sole Occupancy Agreement (this means

that stock can be moved between sites without the need for a movement licence or triggering movement standstills)

- Approximately 100 movements annually
  - Heifers are retained or sold as breeding animals, steers finished on grass and sold direct to staff, local contacts, hotels and chefs in 20 kg boxes; they are taken to Ensors abattoir at Cinderford, two at a time (to minimise stress); this is about 45 minutes away, about the maximum distance to travel to avoid stress
  - Animals fed on grass only, especially important to avoid disease and ill health issues associated with over fat animals (for example calving difficulties, conception failures, fatty liver syndrome and laminitis)
6. Cattle handling and management at Crickley Hill Country Park
- Crucial to have handling facilities, whether permanent on site or mobile or ideally both
  - Saves, time, stress (for both animals and handlers), money and danger

**Reference: for handling animals and grazing sites with public access:**

- [www.grandin.com](http://www.grandin.com)
- [www.grazinganimalsproject.org](http://www.grazinganimalsproject.org):
  - GAP Information leaflet 1 - equine handling facilities
  - GAP Information leaflet 3 - grazing stock on sites with public access
  - GAP Information leaflet 5 - cattle handling facilities

**For more information:**

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