

Management Plan - Millie Bank, Kirkoswald

Overview: This small, steep field is a rare remaining example of an Eden Valley pasture. (Pastures are areas which have been grazed principally; meadows are areas which have had a regular hay crop taken from them. Millie Bank is far too steep to have been cut for hay.) Its size and situation has meant that it has not been 'improved' by the application of artificial fertilisers, and has thus retained the wealth of flora most fields in the area used to have before intensive farming became the norm after the Second World War. Although 'unimproved', fairly heavy grazing in the past meant that many flowering plants were rarely visible. However, in more recent times, relatively light grazing by ponies has allowed the recovery of many species, a process accelerated even more recently by a complete lack of grazing. Two surveys during the Summer of 2011 revealed over a hundred species of plants and trees - a quite remarkable number for such a relatively small area.

However, the present biodiversity and attractiveness of the pasture will be a temporary phenomenon unless steps are taken both to address past problems and to ensure positive future management.

National Vegetation Classification (NVC): Millie Bank is probably an example of NVC MG5 - a neutral grassland rich in flowering plants, of rather variable appearance. It is typical of grazed areas treated in a traditional manner.

Positive Indicator Species: betony, knapweed, devil's bit scabious, pignut, meadow vetchling, common spotted orchid (to name but a few).

Negative Indicator Species: Past over-grazing has allowed both creeping thistle and spear thistle to become well established in places, and enrichment from grazing animals' droppings has encouraged the growth of nettles and common dock, particularly towards the western end of the field. Both marsh ragwort and common ragwort are beginning to proliferate. Although all of these plants sustain quite a number of insects, they are not desirable in areas to be grazed and/or maintained as a flower-rich. At the eastern end of the field, gorse has taken hold, and will quickly spread if not checked. Although a useful species for some insects and nesting birds, it is a dominant plant which shades out less robust species. In the same area, meadowsweet is prolific. Although beneficial to many insects, it is another rather dominant plant which is perhaps more at home in wilder areas than lowland pastures.

Management: On the assumption that the pasture is going to be managed to maintain and, hopefully, increase its biodiversity, the following approaches should be adopted:

Hands-On Work:

- regular pulling/cutting of thistles, nettles and docks as they appear in late Spring, and subsequently during the year;
- removal of gorse in Winter - on a staggered basis over a few years, to avoid any undue erosion;
- pulling/cutting of some of the meadowsweet in late Summer, to reduce 'rankness' and open up areas for other plants;
- pulling and safe disposal of marsh ragwort and common ragwort, as they appear;
- early removal of any signs of Himalayan balsam.

Grazing:

- Winter grazing by cattle and/or horses would ensure that the growth of ranker flora would be discouraged, and would also break up the natural tendency for a mat of 'dead litter' to form on the surface of the pasture (something which inhibits the growth of many species of wild flowers);
- if cattle or horses were unavailable, then sheep would certainly be beneficial, but they tend not to have as much impact as do cattle and horses;

- if the pasture seemed to be becoming ranker despite Winter grazing, then Summer grazing could well be beneficial once every five or six years. Although this would result in a reduction of flowering plants during that year, it should create better conditions for plants in subsequent years.

Access: A well-used public footpath runs through the field, but it does become very muddy in some places. Given the natural flow of water towards the footpath from the steep hill above, any attempt to improve the footpath must take into account the issue of drainage.

If the field is managed mainly for its environmental value, then open access to it shouldn't be out of the question, and it should be possible to create specific paths through it so that people could appreciate its flora, but not trample too much of it. However, given the necessity of re-establishing grazing, every effort must be made to impress on dog-walkers the need to keep animals on a lead and to pick up their droppings.

The Flush: At the eastern end of the field, there is a flush. There are springs immediately above the flush, but it is also possible that there is surface water drainage from the housing estate above the field, and it may be the case that the drains have broken. This part of the field is particularly biodiverse, and any future management of it will need to be planned carefully.

Summary: Millie Bank is an extremely interesting area in terms of its biodiversity, and one that deserves to be protected from damaging agricultural and/or recreational activities. Some sort of management group should be formed to try to ensure its protection and possible improvement, in close collaboration with the owner of the field. It is unlikely that the field would ever be regarded as meriting official protection as, for example, a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), but, if this has not already happened, it probably should be recorded as a Local Wildlife Site (LWS), as this would give it some protection in the (unlikely) event of a potentially detrimental planning application being made for it.

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