

## Ardtole Wildflower Meadow

Ardtole is a 4.2 ha species-rich grassland along the coast of County Down in Northern Ireland with views across to the Isle of Man. In 2015, the species-rich grassland won the Save Our Magnificent Meadows 'Meadow Maker of the Year' award for Northern Ireland. It is part of the Sheepland Coast Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI), and is considered one of Northern Ireland's best examples of lowland meadow and coastal grassland.

The grassland is dominated by fine-leaved grasses with an abundance of herbs and sedges. In the spring, herbs include primrose, violet, spring squill, orchids and pignut. Summer species include burnet-saxifage, yellow rattle, eyebright, red bartsia, wild carrot and field scabious. Common knapweed followed by devil's-bit scabious come into flower later in the summer. Over the years 84 flowering plants have been recorded on the grassland, and there are numerous butterflies including common blue, grayling, dark-green fritillary, red admiral, meadow brown, ringlet, small heath, small copper, tortoiseshell, peacock, painted lady and speckled wood in the scrub borders. The day flying moths silver Y and 5-spot burnet and

hummingbird hawk-moth. Bees, grasshoppers, beetles and hoverflies have also been recorded at Ardtole, and common frogs spawn in the freshwater rock pools behind the rocky shoreline. Linnet, stonechat, meadow pipit, thrush, skylark, wren and whitethroat have all been recorded nesting on the ASSI. As well as the wealth of wildlife, there are also some archaeological remains in the grassland with signs of early horse ploughing between rocky outcrops, a small underground chamber and damaged Cist. Surrounding the grassland are dry stone walls and a rocky bank of salt-wind topped scrub.

Michael Davidson, the landowner, explains his history with the site: "I am a retired National Trust estate warden and have always had an interest in wildlife and wildflowers. The land was passed on from my father-in-law in 1998, but I had been monitoring the flowers for many years before, and I was very keen to manage it for nature. Back then, the upper meadow was very rank and had been grazed on an ad-hoc basis during some summers. The seaward slopes of the coastal grassland always had a good showing of flowers. I started to record the flora and fauna and



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Spring squill © Michael Davidson and Hugh Montgomery



Early summer flowers inc. bird's-foot-trefoil, common orchid and piguet © Michael Davidson and Hugh Montgomery



Common knapweed © Michael Davidson and Hugh Montgomery



Devil's-bit scabious © Michael Davidson and Hugh Montgomery

have records dating back from then. I introduced winter grazing to clear the rank grasses and allow species to emerge. The site was declared an ASSI in 2007, so it was nice to have had a part in improving the nature value of the meadows and for the site to get recognition. Since then I have shared my records and photos with NIEA and enjoy showing people around. I have encouraged my neighbour to manage their land in the same way."

When Michael first acquired the site, part of it was very rank with tall coarse grass (up to knee height) and lots of hogweed with some common knapweed. He decided to cattle graze the site on an annual basis and over time wildflowers started to bloom. After the first two summer seasons of winter grazing, the previously rank areas were covered with Yorkshire fog, common sorrel and lady's bedstraw, and by the third year buttercups, clovers, eyebright, common spotted orchid, tormentil, tufted vetch, yellow rattle, pignut and burnet-saxifrage had appeared. There were even patches of bluebell. To make sure that the wildflowers were sustained, Michael decided to allow them to grow fully, flower and set seed before letting livestock onto the land for the year as part of a pasture management regime. "When seed has set in late summer the meadow attracts masses of goldfinches and linnets" says Michael. "Cattle go on in November and stay until January. I find that winter grazing is ideal for the site. The cattle are off by the end of January to give primroses and violets a chance." Michael does not own livestock, and relies on neighbouring farmers who are agreeable to graze over the winter.

The whole site is in a management agreement with Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) which runs to 2018. It does not permit grazing between 1 May and 31 May, but Michael goes beyond this by restricting grazing further to only graze in the winter months from November to January outside of the flowering season. Michael explains why he is doing this management "I feel it is common sense to graze when all flowers have set seed and before spring flowers appear and have interpreted the management agreement to suit the site. I appreciate that I am not a





Western gorse © Michael Davidson and Hugh Montgomery

farmer and have the freedom to manage this way, but my meadow shows that low-input winter grazing works with nature. I'm glad I kept a record of the plants over the past 20 years as it provides evidence that the management has improved the meadow."

Before the site was an ASSI, Michael used to burn European gorse as a control measure to stop the thorny bush from encroaching into the grassland. The ASSI designation has stopped the practice of burning on site, but the gorse still needs to be managed, so Michael hand cuts the scrub and burns it off site so as not to damage the grassland. Ruderal weeds do grow on the bare patches the following season after gorse clearance, including spear thistle, common ragwort, cats-ear, sow thistle and heath groundsel.

However, European gorse is now confined to the tallest rocks and selected clumps of smaller western gorse and blackberry are left to provide a habitat for wildlife.

Michael explains the future of the site "I'm keen to continue with the current management, but as I'm retired and I may not have the were-with-all to manage the logistics of getting cattle to graze and checking every day. With help from local farmers I hope to continue with this for as long as possible. Also, I have sought permission from NIEA to collect seed for the Millennium Seed Bank. With technical assistance from my neighbour I have created and printed a photographic archive of the local flora."



Heather © Michael Davidson and Hugh Montgomery