

## **“Mill Meadows Local Nature Reserve – Rationale for 2023 grazing plan**

***Josh Childs, Basildon Borough Council’s Parks and Countryside Biodiversity Officer, described to the Mill Meadows Society’s committee that this summer is to be one of short term pain for long term gain. Concerns have been expressed by some members of the public that the presence of the Red Poll cattle in the SSSI fields at this time of year may negatively impact on wildflowers, butterflies and other wildlife.***

***Josh has set out his response below:***

Natural England carried out a SSSI condition assessment in the summer of 2022. The results came back that insufficient management had been taking place in the SSSI meadows and it was to be downgraded from “unfavourable recovering” to “unfavourable”.

This started a conversation between Natural England and Basildon Borough Council about how best to approach the management of the SSSI meadows, and to improve their condition. The main problems were the percentage of scrub present in the meadows and the amount of rank grass outcompeting native grasses and flower species.

Delaying the start of grazing until late July (August/September in some years) has increased vigorous grasses and encouraged scrub encroachment. This is because sward palatability declines markedly in late summer and much standing crop is rejected, allowing competitive species to dominate at the expense of those requiring shorter, more open, turf. Temporarily increasing livestock numbers during late summer/early autumn, may force the cattle on to less palatable plant material.

Working with Natural England a plan was drawn up to increase the grazing, to hit the Meadows harder over the coming years. The idea is to have 15 cows to do the spring graze and attempt to start sooner to get more grazing time. The Council managed to get the cows on earlier this year but were stumped by the weather. There has been more rain than anticipated so there has been a little bit more poaching than planned.

Then, by early May (hoping to get some cows off the SSSI on 1<sup>st</sup> of May), the numbers will be reduced to five cows left on the SSSI throughout the summer. The lower stocking number will allow certain species to progress, and the aim is that the cows will concentrate on the rank grasses, which are sweeter and more nutritious for them. Admittedly, one or two flowers may be lost due to grazing but won’t lose entire species and in the grand scheme of things it will be very minimal.

An example is Devil’s Bit Scabious. It is a late summer flowering plant, and the grazing has been pushed back to try and let it flower more. However, doing this over several years has reduced the number of plants. This is because the grass is outcompeting the scabious. The way the plant’s leaves lay flat on the ground means it is not able to get enough light, and so not getting enough energy to flower and set seed. One can see a decline in Devil’s Bit Scabious present. It is one of many examples of the decline in flowering plants.

Later, in the summer (August/ September) the remaining cows will come back to help the five completely graze down the site taking away as much vegetation as possible. If need be, the scrub will be cut will mechanically.

Because of the change in the stocking of the SSSI meadows, this plan was taken to the Rural Payments Agency who oversee Countryside Stewardship agreements. They were happy with the plan and the stocking numbers, so the Council was able to proceed.

The vigorous grass species need to be reduced to encourage the finer Meadow grass to return.

I have managed SSSI grasslands in this way before in previous roles and they have been successful. The plan has also gone through three Natural England Advisers, one independent Ecologist and the Rural Payments agency. All agree this is best practice.

Josh Childs ‘

Parks and Countryside Biodiversity Officer

Basildon Borough Council