



E. Moss

Summer meadow flowers and grasses

Loss of meadows

Grassland rich in wildlife is a 'spin-off' of traditional farming methods. When grass fields had an annual cycle of mowing for hay followed by grazing this provided ideal conditions for wildflowers to flourish. The wildflowers in turn made the meadows a haven for insect and bird life. The change in this traditional pattern of farming led to the decline of meadows and they are now a rare and important habitat. The changes included the use of fertilizers to enrich the grass growth and yield of hay or silage. When the soil's fertility is increased in this way the grasses out-compete the wildflower species, which prefer fewer nutrients.

Meadow management

Summer flowering meadows are usually managed by cutting and removing grass after the flowering period. Meadows cut at the end of July provide a safe nesting habitat for some ground nesting birds such as skylark, lapwing and curlew.



T. Burney

Bringing in the hay crop.

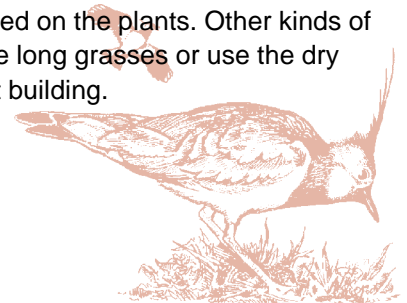
Hay is made when the grass has had no rain on it for several days. The way a meadow is mown can help wildlife too - starting with a tractor-mounted mower from the middle of the field and cutting outwards, or from one side to the other, may benefit birds with chicks and young hares.

Once mown the grass is turned often using a tractor-mounted rake so that the moisture content is reduced. This also allows the flower and grass seeds to drop and gives the 'mini-beast' population a chance to crawl down to the ground. The goodness is still in the grass and when good hay is made it 'sweats' in the haystack and gives off a distinctive, sweet smell at country shows where there is a class for hay, the judge will be seen smelling the hay.

After mowing it is best to graze the field - cattle are ideal because of their weight and foot size, but sheep can do the job too. As they graze the animals reduce the amount of grasses and herbs and therefore reduce the nutrient level in the meadow. Their feet help knock flower seeds to the soil surface ready for germination.

Wildlife in meadows

Mammals benefiting from meadows and their management include brown hares, voles, field mice, foxes, stoats and hedgehogs. Some birds may use the various plants as food sources or consume invertebrates that feed on the plants. Other kinds of birds may nest in the long grasses or use the dry grasses in their nest building.



Different flowers and grasses support different species:

English Name of Plant	Wildlife Associated/value
annual meadow grass	meadow brown, ringlet and wall butterflies
lady's bedstraw	many kinds of moth caterpillar feed on this
common sorrel	seeds are food for finches, small copper butterfly
bird's foot trefoil	common blue butterfly
dandelion	Seed eating birds, hares



Ringlet



Small Copper



Bullfinch



Hare

Wildflower folklore

Meadow Sweet

The sweet smelling flowers of this plant were thought to be dangerous - if you smelled them too much you might fall asleep forever!

Dandelion

The dandelion seedhead is known as a "dandelion clock." You pick the seedhead and count the number of blows needed to remove all the seeds and that number is what time it is. If dandelion is placed in a bag of unripened fruit the fruit will quickly ripen.



Dandelion clock

Yarrow

This was tied in bundles on baby's cradles to protect them from witches. If yarrow juice is smeared on your hands and you plunge them into the river fish will be drawn to you. Yarrow mixed with pig fat was used as a healing ointment.

Clover

A four-leaf clover is meant to bring good luck but it was believed it would provide the owner with 'second sight' - the power to see witches and fairies.



Red Campion

Red Campion

Picking these flowers was said to be very unlucky, and if a child picked them their parents would die.

Plantain

The leaves were believed to stop a wound bleeding.

There are many books on flower folklore and the uses of plants in medieval and ancient medicine. An interesting study can be done on how important plants have been to people over history and how we still use extracts from them today - aloe in skin creams, willow for aspirin, witch hazel for cleaning skin, lemon for cleaning grease from crockery and lavender or camomile to help induce sleep. Of course, the most important feature of green plants for human beings is the fact that they produce oxygen.