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Waxcap - grasslands - an assessment of English sites

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Introduction

Waxcap-grassland fungi are of conservation interest as indicators of semi-natural, species-rich grasslands, a habitat seriously threatened throughout the UK and Europe. The species concerned are strongly associated with unfertilised, unimproved, nutrient-poor grasslands. They often thrive in short, moss-rich, often highly grazed swards, which may be of low interest for other organisms such as flowering plants. They have received little conservation concern until relatively recently with the inclusion of three grassland species on the UK Biodiversity Action Plan BAP (Anon 1999). Their ecology and distribution are still relatively poorly understood. Awareness of their importance amongst the wider nature conservation community and the public is still fragmentary.

What was done

The primary aims of this project have been a) to source and collate distribution data for all the indicator waxcap-grassland species in England, and b) use this data to produce a preliminary list of the most important English grasslands known to date. The primary aims of this project have been a) to source and collate distribution data for all the indicator waxcap-grassland species in England, and b) use this data to produce a preliminary list of the most important English grasslands known to date.

This, together with the dataset of nearly 20,000 records will for the first time enable well-informed decisions to be made on appropriate site protection.

Additional information is supplied to summarise the known threats to grassland indicator fungi, and on best management practice. To help inform the BAP process in England, three species dossiers have been produced for: 1) the pink waxcap *Hygrocybe calyptriformis*; 2) the date waxcap *Hygrocybe spadicea*, and 3) the olive earthtongue *Microglossum olivaceum*.

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Results and conclusions

The project results clearly show that England has some outstanding examples of waxcap-grassland sites both in a national and in a European context. Twelve sites fulfil waxcap criteria set in Scandinavia by Rald (1985) and Vesterholt et al (1999) for sites of international importance. A further thirty-two sites fulfil these criteria for sites of national importance. England, together with the rest of the UK remains a stronghold for waxcap-grassland habitat. It does not appear to have yet experienced the devastating levels of suitable habitat decline which have taken place in much of Northern Europe. It holds 15% of known European sites for the pink waxcap, with the UK as a whole holding a staggering 50% of known sites (Evans 2003a)!

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English Nature's viewpoint

This report provides a preliminary list of the most important English grasslands known to date. This, together with the dataset of nearly 20,000 records will for the first time enable well-informed decisions to be made on appropriate site protection

Key References

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