

Leaflet produced with
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Town Council.



North Meadow

National Nature Reserve

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Front cover photograph: North Meadow NNR.
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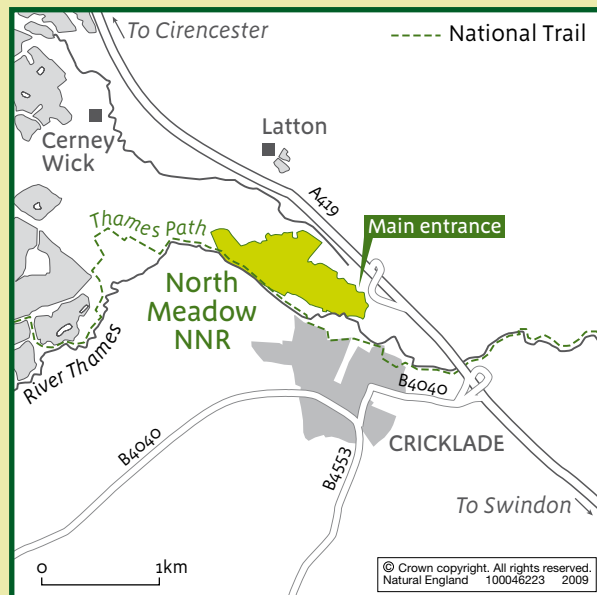
North Meadow hay cut

Why is it important?

The NNR has a great variety of wildflowers and is of international importance as one of the finest examples of a lowland hay meadow in Europe. It is protected as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

Around 80% of Britain's snakehead fritillaries grow at North Meadow. This beautiful and nationally-scarce flower is named after the shape of the flower bud before it opens and the snakeskin pattern on its petals.

Once there were many meadows like this along the upper Thames but very few remain today; most have been destroyed by modern agriculture and gravel extraction.



How to get there

North Meadow is about 20 minutes walk north west of Cricklade town centre. Car parking and bus links can be found in the town, from where the reserve can be reached by public footpaths.

North Meadow is one of over 200 National Nature Reserves across England. They were established to protect the most important areas of wildlife habitat and geological formations in Britain. Today our National Nature Reserves also offer a fantastic opportunity to enjoy the countryside, attracting about 15 million visitors a year.

For more information about Natural England and details of other National Nature Reserves in England, visit our website at www.naturalengland.org.uk

A traditional hay meadow

North Meadow National Nature Reserve (NNR) is an old, traditional hay meadow on the northern edge of Cricklade. The reserve covers an area of 44 hectares (108 acres), roughly the area of 60 football pitches.



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Snakeshead fritillary

What to see and when

© Robert Wolstenholme

North Meadow has something to offer almost all year round. In April, the meadow is covered by around 500,000 wild snakeshead fritillaries, along with bright yellow clusters of marsh marigold and the white of cuckoo flower [lady's smock]. Also at this time of year, if you look closely, you will find the tiny adder's tongue fern.

By late April cowslips are in flower and in June, North Meadow bursts into colour with hay meadow flowers. The rich purples of greater burnet and common knapweed contrast with the yellows of meadow buttercup and yellow rattle, while the rest of the meadow is filled with ox-eye daisies, meadow rue and meadow sweet. There are over 250 plant species including some striking wild grasses.

Plants are not the only attraction at North Meadow. During the summer you'll see many interesting insects feeding here, including brightly-coloured burnet moths, dramatic blue damselflies and a host of beetles and butterflies.

Throughout the year the meadow and its boundary hedges are filled with bird life. In spring, skylarks make nests amongst the grass, while in the hedges and tree hollows, great tits, blue tits, chaffinches, linnets and tree creepers settle in. Along the river banks and ditches reed buntings, grey wagtails, sedge warblers and sometimes a kingfisher can be found. In the summer, swallows, sand martins and swifts can often be seen overhead.

Banded demoiselle

Reed bunting





Left to right: Hay making, the meadow in flood, North Meadow stone. © Robert Wolstenholme

How it is managed

North Meadow is common land, where, for hundreds of years, the townspeople of Cricklade have had the right to graze livestock from 12 August to 12 February. Years ago, the meadow was divided into dozens of plots, owned by small farms, who took the hay. Several ancient carved stones, positioned at various points across the meadow, mark the boundaries separating the different 'hay lots'.

In the middle ages the Manorial Court Leet, a form of local government, came into being. Cricklade still retains its ancient Court Leet, and its role includes administering the rights of the inhabitants of the 'Hundred and Borough of Cricklade' to graze cattle and horses from August to February. The Court Leet appoints a Hayward who supervises the grazing and upkeep of the meadow and collects fees due.

Nowadays the hay crop grown during the spring and early summer is sold to local farmers. The hay is cut after 1 July when

the wildflowers have set seed and has to be removed by 12 August so that it may be grazed. In some years hay meadow seed is harvested for use in grassland restoration projects.

During the winter the Rivers Thames and Churn frequently flood the meadow. Flooding is vital to the growth of many plants and helps to maintain the great variety of species at North Meadow.

Natural England has owned most of the meadow since the early 1970s and works closely with the Court Leet and residents of Cricklade to ensure traditional management continues. Today the people of Cricklade are involved with the meadow in other ways as well, through local groups and volunteer teams carrying out surveys and practical work.

In 2008 North Meadow won the Royal Horticultural Society's Britain in Bloom Discretionary Award for Conservation and the Environment.