

**Ouse Valley Link Trial Area
Report: Summary**

**English Nature
Habitat Restoration Project**

Ouse Valley Link

Trial Area

Summary Report

August 1998





The Ouse Valley Link Project

The Ouse Valley Link Project is part of a national Habitat Restoration Project, initiated by English Nature in April 1996. The Project aims to investigate how existing Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMS), such as Countryside Stewardship, can be used to increase the abundance and variety (the biodiversity) of our wildlife. Four Trial Areas, each of about 100km², were chosen to represent different agricultural landscapes typical of lowland England. The Project forms part of English Nature's contribution to the UK's Biodiversity Action Plan for achieving targets agreed at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. Its aims also accord with Article 10 of the EC Habitats Directive.

The Ouse Valley Trial Area is situated on the River Great Ouse, between Beachampton and Lavendon in north Buckinghamshire, within the West Anglian Plain Natural Area¹. The river meanders through the Trial Area from south west to north east, and splits into channels in several places, creating several islands. The valley is flat, broad and low-lying (the highest point in the Trial Area is 100 metres A.O.D.) with rich pasture and arable land. Beyond the floodplain the land rises to form a wide, gently undulating plateau either side of the river corridor, dotted with occasional outcrops of oolitic limestone. Two smaller rivers, the Tove and the Ouzel, flow into the Great Ouse within the Trial Area, and it is crossed by the Grand Union Canal.

¹*English Nature and the Countryside Commission, have recently identified 120 Natural Areas, and 181 associated Countryside Character Areas, in England.*

Setting up the Project

The first year of the Project was spent in publicising the project, especially to farmers and landowners, and determining the priorities for habitat restoration. The following stages were involved:

- Informing farmers and other landowners about the Project and how they can become involved.
- Discussing with representatives of the statutory and non statutory countryside organisations how they might support the Project, and with them, identified existing incentive schemes which are available to farmers to help them enhance the biodiversity of their farms.
- Setting up a Steering Group and an Advisory Group comprising representatives of the countryside organisations and farming community.
- Carrying out a field survey of the existing wildlife with the permission of the farmers concerned and used this field survey, along with existing records from the area, to select habitats and species for priority action.
- Visiting farms to discuss with landowners their experiences and opinions of habitat restoration/conservation and ELMS and, by means of a questionnaire, identified the farm constraints affecting habitat restoration.

- Combining this information, in discussion with the farming community, to develop an idealised ‘vision’ for creating a more wildlife friendly countryside, with particular reference to the priority habitats and species in the Biodiversity Action Plan.
- Producing promotional leaflets and display boards; attended agricultural shows and arranged farm walks.

The Restoration Vision for The Ouse Valley

The vision for the Ouse Trial Area identifies the recreation of floodplain habitats such as flood meadows, wet woodland and ponds as a priority, as well as extending and linking habitats associated with mixed farming, such as field margins and species-rich grassland. The preferred areas for habitat creation have been selected by identifying:

- Areas suitable for habitat creation/ restoration, adjacent to existing semi-natural habitats
- Areas that support key Biodiversity Action Plan species.

Potential areas are shown on a restoration vision map. This map is designed to help farmers and other land managers decide for themselves which options, if any, to adopt on their land. It should be emphasised that the information provided in the report is designed to provide factual information and advice only. The final extent and location of any new or restored habitats will depend entirely on the circumstances of each farm.

Implementing the Restoration Vision

In order to implement the Restoration Vision we have:

- Advised interested farmers and other landowners on how they can increase the value of their land for wildlife. Over thirty are currently working with the Project on restoration schemes.
- Assisted with the submission of applications for various ELMS, for a diverse range of habitat creation and enhancement schemes, including tree planting, hedge restoration, sympathetic management of arable field margins, meadow creation and floral enrichment, extensive management of alluvial flood meadows, creation of buffer strips along rivers, and pond restoration and creation.
- Set up Barn Owl nest boxes on farmland adjacent to the River Ouse. Inspections by the Hawk and Owl Trust have shown that barn owls have already used these boxes.
- Produced a regular newsletter about the Project and submitted articles to local newspapers, farming and nature conservation publications.
- Produced a set of display boards, which have been exhibited at a number of events (agricultural shows, village fetes etc) to promote the Project.

- Monitored the take up of ELMS, the extent of each habitat restored and views of users of the schemes.
- Initiated a ten year programme to monitor the success of the habitats restored/created and their contribution to supporting key plant and animal species.

Details of the key habitats and species and our targets for restoring them are given in Table 1. Details of available ELMS are given in Table 2.

Following the end of the Ouse Link Project in March 1999, a report will be produced identifying what has been learnt from the Project and the contribution this learning can make to implementing BAP targets at a local level across the English lowlands.

For further information about The Ouse Valley Link Project or the Habitat Restoration Project as a whole please contact:

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Table 1 Summary of UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), and/or Natural Area (NA) Priority Habitats within the Trial Area, indicating their associated Target Species

KEY BAP & NA HABITATS <i>with Overall Target for the Trial Area.</i>	Target Species	UK BAP Priority	West Anglian Plain NA Priority
Cereal Field Margins and Set-Aside (Cereal Field Margins is a BAP Priority Habitat) Targets <ul style="list-style-type: none"> for field margins in 20% of the arable area to be sympathetically managed. for all set-aside in the Trial Area to be managed for maximum benefits to wildlife. 	Brown hare	*	*
	Grey partridge	*	*
	Corn bunting	*	
	Skylark	*	*
	Meadow brown butterfly**		
	Round-leaved fluellen**		
Ancient and / or species-rich hedgerows and scrub (Ancient and / or species-rich hedgerows is a BAP Priority Habitat) Target: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> for at least 20% of gappy hedges to be restored. for 10% of lost hedgerows to be replanted. 	Pipistrelle	*	*
	Tree sparrow	*	
	Song thrush	*	
	Linnet	*	
	Gatekeeper butterfly**		
Lowland hay meadows and old permanent pasture (Lowland Hay Meadow is a BAP Priority Habitat) Target: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> for the amount of semi-improved grassland to increase from 2.3% to 10% of the Trial Area. 	Skylark	*	*
	Small heath**		
	Yellow meadow ant**		
	Burnet saxifrage**		
	Bird's-foot-trefoil**		
	Cowslip**		
	Lady's bedstraw**		
	Meadow vetchling**		
	Common knapweed**		
Yellow rattle**			
Alluvial Flood Meadows (BAP Priority Habitat) Target: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> for 20% of floodplain grassland to be extensively managed by hay-cutting or grazing. 	Snipe		*
	Lapwing		*
	Redshank		*
	Yellow wagtail**		
	Adder's tongue**		
	Ragged robin**		
	Great burnet		*

Standing Open Water: Ponds, Lakes, Reedbeds (Eutrophic Standing Waters and Reedbeds are BAP Priority Habitats) Targets: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> for every farm in the Trial Area to have at least one healthy pond. for 50% (increase from 22%) of the area of gravel pits to be managed sympathetically for wildlife. 	Reed bunting	*	*
	Sand martin**		
	Ringed plover		*
	Gadwall		*
	Great crested newt	*	*
	Flowering rush**		
	Shining pond weed**		
	Red-eyed damselfly**		
Rivers (part of Open Waters NA Key Habitat) Target: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> for at least 25% of main river to meet the criteria in the habitat vision. 	Water vole	*	*
	Otter	*	*
	Barn owl		*
	Kingfisher		*
	Spined loach**		
	White-legged damselfly**		
	Black poplar**		
	Willow pollards**		
River water-crowfoot**			
Broadleaved Woodland (Ancient Semi-natural Woodland is a NA Key Habitat. Wet Woodland is a BAP Priority Habitat) Target: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> for all woods over 2ha to be managed sympathetically. for the area of woodland to double from 2.3% to 5% of the Trial Area. 	Great spotted woodpecker**		
	Wood white		*
	Black hairstreak		*
	Dead wood beetles**		
	Bluebell**		
	Early purple orchid**		
	Herb Paris**		
Lowland parkland (Lowland Wood-pasture and Parkland is a BAP Priority Habitat) Target: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> for existing parkland to be maintained and all former areas restored. 	Mature oaks**		
	Common lime**		
	Walnut**		
	Parkland beetle** (<i>Prionocyphon serraticornis</i>)		
Limestone grassland (Lowland Calcareous Grassland is a BAP Priority Habitat) Target: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> for all existing limestone grasslands to be sympathetically managed. for the current area of the habitat to double. 	Marbled white**		
	Field scabious**		
	Salad burnet**		
	Harebell**		
	Bee orchid**		
** Other priority species within the Ouse Trial Area			

Table 2 Summary of Key Mechanisms and Incentives for Implementation

Agency	Extent of Resource
English Nature	Annual payments are made for the sympathetic management of Sites of Special Scientific Interest.
Environment Agency	Capital payments of up to 50% of costs are made for small waterside restoration projects including tree and shrub planting.
Forestry Authority Woodland Grant Scheme	Capital payments are paid in installments for the planting of new woodlands and restocking. Additional supplements are also available to assist the projects, including planting conifers or broadleaves on arable land or improved grassland, compensation for excluding stock from woodland and encouragement of natural regeneration.
Forestry Authority Woodland Improvement Grant	Capital payments of up to 50% of costs are made to enhance existing woodlands, eligible under Providing Public Recreation in Woodlands, Under managed Woods or Woodland Biodiversity options.
MAFF Countryside Stewardship Scheme	Capital and annual management payments are made for the conservation and enhancement of landscapes, wildlife, historic features and public enjoyment. A wide range of payments are available. The scheme offers 10-year management agreements, and acceptance is discretionary.
MAFF Farm Woodland Premium Scheme	Annual payments for planting new woods on land currently in productive agriculture, in addition to the Forestry Authority's Woodland Grant Scheme.
MAFF Non-Rotational and Rotational Set-Aside	Annual payments for set-aside land, eligible under field margin, grassland or natural regeneration management options under the Arable Area Payments Scheme.
MAFF Organic Aid Scheme	Annual payments for the conversion to organic farming from conventional practices.