



In a field of tall waving grasses, wildflowers grow abundantly and bees hum in the warm scented air. Just over the hedge, the song of a skylark rises above a quiet, lush, well-fertilised mass of deep green pasture. Both types of habitat are examples of Irish grassland or meadow. Grassland comprises that mosaic of fields, field edges, streams, hedges, ponds, wet corners, patches of woodland and old farm buildings that make up much of the Irish landscape. As such, grassland is an extremely important habitat for Irish wildlife and species diversity.



With our current cool and wet climate conditions, Ireland is particularly well-suited for grass. It is our most abundant plant by far, with 65-70 per cent of the country covered by some type of grassland. Much of this provides the foundation for the milk and meat industries that have created our agricultural wealth. The rest consists of wild grasslands and areas for amenity and recreation, such as golf courses, playing fields, parks and gardens.

Soil type is an important factor determining grassland habitat type. Different pH levels in soil – neutral, acid or alkaline – can indicate various habitats.

Neutral grasslands are often low-lying, with deep soils rich in nutrients. They vary greatly depending on how they are managed, and this

determines the wildlife value of the habitat. Examples of neutral grasslands include callows and turloughs. Callows are lowlands around a river, also known as river meadows. Turloughs, meaning 'dry lakes', result from seasonal flooding. They feature much unique plant life, including ragged robin and the rare fen violet.

Acid grasslands are normally found in upland areas. Here the acidic soil supports a wide range of plant species, such as the creeping bent grasses. One of the best-known acid grasslands is the Curragh in Co Kildare.

Alkaline grasslands usually lie over limestone. Examples of alkaline grasslands include esker meadows, dry limestone meadows and machairs. Esker meadows serve as a reminder that Ireland was once gripped by an ice age. These ancient, species-rich landscapes consist of worm-like hills winding across the terrain. Dry limestone meadows occur in the Burren, Co Clare and the Aran Islands. They feature many unique plant species, such as harebell and bird's foot trefoil. Grasslands behind growing dunes along the coast are known as machairs. The word derives from the Irish 'magh' or 'maghera', meaning level field or plain.

THREATS TO THE HABITAT

Unfortunately for wildlife and biodiversity, in the last 30 years, grassland management has moved away from traditional methods of hay-making towards a more intensively productive system. Threats to grassland habitats have increased in correspondence to increased pressure on Irish farmland and grasslands to produce more yield. This has led to greater use of harmful fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides, and 'improved' methods of grassland management. These changes have had a huge impact on Irish wildlife and the countryside.

An increase in the use of heavy machinery has required larger fields, resulting in the removal of hedgerows. Inorganic fertilisers and chemical weed killers have reduced local flora

and fauna. Noted examples of this include the crash in the peregrine falcon population in the 1980s, a direct consequence of increased use of the pesticide DDT.

The many other issues facing grasslands and farmlands in Ireland include drainage and reclamation, which reduce areas of wetlands; improper disposal of farm wastes; overgrazing and uncontrolled burning.

WHAT CAN INDIVIDUALS DO TO PROTECT THE HABITAT?

The threats facing our native grasslands and farmlands may seem overwhelming, but there is plenty you can do to help. Let your garden grow a bit wild! Opt for a low-maintenance garden with wildflowers. Plant locally-sourced seeds. Keep lawn-feed to a minimum and avoid using herbicides.

People can create their own little piece of grassland or rehabilitate a disturbed old grassland. A good approach is to adopt a management plan to a plot of land, with careful mowing regimes, species reintroductions and periods of non-disturbance.

Farmers can play their part in maintaining grassland habitats by adhering to good farming practices, such as conserving areas of semi-natural habitat; minimising or cutting out pesticide-use; and joining and adhering to Rural Environmental Protection Schemes (REPS).

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Irish Wildlife Trust: www.iwt.ie
- Teagasc: www.teagasc.ie
- The Heritage Council: www.heritagecouncil.ie
- Notice Nature: www.noticenature.ie
- National Parks & Wildlife Service: www.npws.ie
- Biology.ie: www.biology.ie