Step by Step Guide to Limestone Grasslands on the Mendip Hills AONB
#mendipgrasslands

There is a lot of grassland on the Mendip Hills, but how can you tell if you're walking on an amazing piece of species rich limestone grassland or an 'improved' field of grass? Here's your step-by-step, excuse the pun, guide to Limestone Grasslands.

First step is to look at the colour of the grassland. Is it all lush, rich green grass flowing in the wind? That's probably 'improved' grassland. Or, does it look yellow, more yellow and hugging the ground? That's probably good limestone grassland then!

Second, are you on the south facing slopes of the Mendip Hills, and is the limestone rock breaking the surface as the soils are so thin? There's a really good chance that this is limestone grassland.

Step a little bit closer. Let's look at the plants themselves. Look for 'indicator' species, these are typical wildflowers that are easy to see (easier than the different types of grasses themselves!): **common bird's-foot-trefoil, common rock-rose, cowslip, eyebright, greater knapweed, lady's bedstraw, milkwort, small scabious,** and **wild thyme.**

You can mark these indicator species as rare, occasional or frequent. Try stopping 10 times, in 10 different places, the plant is Rare if it occurs in 1-2 stops out of 10, Occasional if it occurs in 3-4 stops out of 10 or Frequent if it occurs in more than 5 stops. As a general rule though, the more types of plants you see the better.

Variety, or biodiversity, is the crucial part here. The wide variety of plants, with all the different micro-habitats created by the visible geology where there are lots of nooks and crannies in the exposed rocks, create a really important habitat that support far more insects than that lush, improved field that's great for grazing cattle but little else. The limestone grassland is really important for pollinator insects and therefore our food supply.

Not a lot left

We are lucky to have some of the finest examples of limestone grassland on the Mendip Hills. There's not much left in the country, luckily the remaining areas have been left and not improved due to the difficulty of using modern farming methods and machinery on them. They may still be used for rough grazing, but commercial livestock breeds will struggle to put on the desired bulk from the small plants.

One of the problems we face is abandoned and under-grazed areas that allow stronger grasses and scrub to spread on the grassland shading out the wildflowers. Light grazing during the spring or autumn is great but this is fiddly for most graziers having to move their stock around. Some graziers don't want to get involved in helping to manage the limestone grassland nature reserves. The conservation bodies frequently have to compensate local farmers for the extra hassle of grazing these areas.

Another growing concern is that well-meaning landowners plant trees on the grasslands in a miss-guided effort to combat climate change. We do need trees but we need the right tree in the right place and not on precious limestone grasslands.

To see where the priority limestone grassland habitats are on the Mendip Hills click **here;**
Habitats and Species > Grassland and Priority Habitat Inventory > Lowland Calcareous Grassland

To read more about identifying limestone grasslands and how to look after them click on the links below:
How to Identify different types of grasslands
Calcareous Grasslands