10. Surveying for Plants and Animals

This sheet will explain some simple survey methods for you to discover more about your site and how it is changing over time.

A burial site can be managed very well with little surveying of the plants and animals present but it can be interesting to learn more. This gives information for leaflets or talks and can lead to a great sense of achievement as wildflowers, reptiles or breeding birds increase over the years.

Digital photography has made identification much easier than it was. If in doubt take photos of the plant, nest, butterfly or dropping which is puzzling you. Always make a note of the date of a survey or a sighting and please let Caring for God's Acre know what you are finding.

SURVEYING FOR PLANTS

1. Counting flower heads or whole plants

Count the flowers of one or two particular plants which are part of your grassland and which indicate how the whole site is doing. This could be cowslip in spring flowering grassland and orchids or yellow rattle in a summer one. Simply count the number of flower heads each year (one 'spike' covered in flowers counts as one).

Typical plants of coarse and tussocky grassland include:

False oat grass, cocksfoot, Yorkshire fog and hogweed. In an area of tussocky grass these plants are a sign of good management. If, however, these are increasing in your long grass areas year on year then consider mowing a bit more often (see sheet A2, Caring for Grassland).

Typical plants of fine grassland include:

Finer meadow grasses like sweet vernal grass and crested dog's tail. Flowers include: bird's-foot trefoil, stitchwort, cowslip, betony, ox-eye daisy, lady's bedstraw, scabious and speedwell. If these are staying constant or increasing then give yourselves a pat on the back; your grass cutting regime is working.

Fungi are also good indicators of old grassland and thrive in close mown grass. Record the fungi present on a site and, if you cannot identify them, then take photos of the fungus when fully emerged, ideally showing both the top and underside. Numbers of individual fungi tell you more about the weather than the fungus, but it is interesting to note where they appear on a site.

Contact the Association of British Fungus Groups. Is there a local group who would be interested in visiting your burial site?

2. Make a species list

Keep an annual list of all the different plants you see. Over time you may be able to identify more and more. The Field Studies Council fold-out charts are helpful for getting going.

3. DAFOR survey

A more detailed plant survey involves drawing up a list of plants and grasses on the site (or a chosen part of it) and giving each species a rating:

Dominant – over 75% cover

Abundant – 75 to 51% cover

Frequent – 50 to 26% cover

Occasional – 25 to 11% cover

Rare – 10 to 1% cover

Early Marsh Orchid

Contact the Botanical Society to see if a local group would be interested in helping to survey a burial site.

If you cannot identify something then take a photo of it, including as much of the plant as possible (leaves, flowers, seeds). Give it your own name (purple flower, photo 1) until you find someone who can identify it for you.

SURVEYING FOR ANIMALS

Amphibians and reptiles

Slow worms do not often come out into the open but find places to get the warmth of the sun where they can stay out of sight. Put down a 'cover object' such as a piece of corrugated tin, old carpet, plywood or roofing felt.

10. Surveying for Plants and Animals

Place this in partial sun, away from visited areas, within an area of tussocky or long grass, near a compost heap or deadwood pile. This needs to be 2ft square or larger. Lift up regularly and check to see if slow worms or other creatures are underneath. All reptiles are easier to see in spring and autumn or early in the morning on a hot summer's day as it is at these cooler times that they need to bask.

Grass snakes lay their eggs in compost heaps. When you come to empty the compost in the autumn keep an eye out for hatched grass snake eggs which are whitish in colour and leathery. Count egg shells, recording numbers of both hatched and unhatched eggs. You may also find the sloughed skin of a grass snake or slow worm.

See if there is a local Amphibian and Reptile Group with members who might be interested in visiting your burial ground.

Mammals

You may not see any mammals within a burial ground but can often see tracks and signs.

Look out for: footprints in soft mud, bat droppings below eaves, 'runs' or paths through long grass (these become visible after cutting), gaps and paths through hedges, nests or hair caught on hedges and used in bird's nests.

Contact your local Mammal Society and see if they would be interested in visiting your site and perhaps doing some live mammal trapping.

Birds

See sheet B4, Swifts and Other Birds, for surveying suggestions. Contact your county bird recorder, wildlife trust or the RSPB to enquire whether there is a local enthusiast to help.

Bumblebees and butterflies

There are thousands of insects and other invertebrates in the UK and so surveying them may be a daunting prospect. Bumblebees and butterflies however are relatively easy to identify so have a try and take photos if you are unsure. A good way to do this is to make a 'timed count'. Make a note of the total numbers of each species seen in either half an hour or an hour. Repeat this over the spring and summer, as often as you are able (weekly would be ideal). Choose times when the weather is warm and dry with little wind.

Making a biological record

There are national records kept of plant and animal species which have been identified previously. You may have seen these when first finding out about the burial ground (see sheet A1, The Five Steps). Let your local wildlife trust, county recorders or local authority records staff know what you have been seeing and try to make a habit of sending them your records every year. They will be able to give advice on how to make a record and what information to include. If you are unsure of something then take photos.

Have a look on the 'iSpot' website, for help with both identification and also making records.

Please let Caring for God's Acre know if you see slow worms or other reptiles, hedgehogs, waxcaps, breeding swifts or you have an ancient yew tree.

Useful contacts

Amphibian and Reptile Conservation, www.arc-trust.org

Amphibian and Reptile Groups – UK, www.arguk.org

Botanical Society of the British Isles, www.bsbi.org.uk

Buglife, www.buglife.org.uk

Bumblebee Conservation Trust, www.bumblebeeconservation.org

Caring for God's Acre, www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk

iSpot, www.ispot.org.uk

Local Authority Ecologist and County Recorders

Mammal Society, www.mammal.org.uk.

Plantlife, www.plantlife.org.uk

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, www.rspb.org.uk

Wildlife Trusts, www.wildlifetrusts.org

Bank Vole

Useful reading

The Field Studies Council fold-out charts are an excellent tool for starting to identify and survey wildlife.