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## Creating a Floodplain Meadow Habitat for Oxfordshire

Along the River Thames above Oxford lie some of Britain's most beautiful meadows redolent with ancient names such as devils bit scabious, great burnet, jack-go-to-bed-by-noon. They play a vital role in storing carbon, mitigating floods and producing our food. Only 4 square miles of these meadows remain in the UK (an area the size of Heathrow Airport). The Thames Valley Wildflower Meadow Restoration Project has recently launched an ambitious project to try to restore and recreate them, not just to preserve the past but as a vital resource for our future.

The Thames Valley Wildflower Meadow Restoration Project is a farmer and landowner-led initiative along the Upper Thames dedicated to restoring its rare floodplain meadow habitat. Much of this habitat is concentrated between Lechlade and Abingdon in fragmented sites that are designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) or Local Wildlife Sites (LWS). The project aims to connect these up by restoring (or recreating) the intervening meadows to form a joined up wildflower meadow network to contribute to the Nature Recovery Network for Oxfordshire 2050.

Since initiating the project 18 months ago, Catriona Bass and Kevan Martin of Long Mead Farm at Swinford have found themselves knocking on open doors, from Christ Church College in the centre of Oxford, who are restoring Christ Church Meadows in July as part of the project, to farmers at Eynsham and Cumnor. In a situation, where only 4% of Oxfordshire retains any real value for wildlife, and with the pressure of unsustainable growth in the county, farmers and landowners are coming together in an attempt to halt the catastrophic decline in biodiversity.

This bottom-up approach, operating neighbour to neighbour, and collaborating with environmental organisations and academic experts, is designed to address issues of sustainability that can often undermine landscape-scale environmental projects.

The project is underpinned by Long Mead's Biodiversity Research Project. With advisors and collaborators from the Floodplain Meadows Partnership at the Open University and the Plant Sciences and Zoology Departments of Oxford University, the project brings together the long-term practical know-how of farmers and the long-term research of scholars, with the knowledge of environmental organisations and other stakeholders to address key questions of sustainable food production, biodiversity loss and climate change.

Recent surveys undertaken by Catriona Bass and Alison Muldal, who has joined the project having recently retired from Natural England, indicate that creating a connected wildflower meadow network in the Oxford area is more achievable than is currently believed. 'It turns out that the habitat maps are outdated,' Catriona Bass says. 'A good number of the meadows on this stretch have been in Natural England's Agri-Environment schemes

for a couple of decades and may not have been surveyed since their restoration began. Our surveys show that a significant number now qualify as species-rich Biodiversity Action Plan Habitats. This means that, between Cumnor and Oxford at least, only a few pieces of the wildflower meadow jigsaw still need to be filled.'

The Thames Valley Wildflower Meadow Restoration Project envisions a future where species-rich hay meadows can once again be an integral part of commercial agriculture, where the River Thames floods to create a beautiful and fully functioning rural environment rather than to damage our urban homes.

It envisions a future where citizens and visitors in Oxfordshire can enjoy the Upper Thames river valley with fields of wildflowers, butterflies, birds and other wildlife, experiencing the health and well-being benefits that earlier generations took for granted.

'A Nature Recovery Network for Oxfordshire is potentially achievable,' Catriona Bass says. 'But we need a radical change in the architecture of communication and collaboration.

Instead of a pyramid, where the long-term knowledge of those on the land is lost at the bottom, we need a network of equals. Farmers, NGOs, academics, local government and all the political parties need to work together on biodiversity loss and climate change - the most critical issues of our age.'

#### **For further information contact:**

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#### **Notes for editors**

1. For more information on Thames Valley Wildflower Meadow Restoration Project, see attached PDF

2. In the UK, around 1100 hectares remain of great burnet grassland, the type of wildflower meadow that is concentrated on the Upper Thames around Oxford (NVC classification, MG4).

3. For research and literature go to [Floodplain Meadows Partnership](#)