

Friston Gallops Grazing Project – Background and Update.

This project aims to manage the 35ha of chalk grassland in Friston Forest.

The Friston Gallops are an important area for the flora and fauna associated with chalk grassland which has evolved through livestock grazing of shallow calcareous soils. Most notable is the large assemblage of butterflies found on the site, with over 35 species recorded, including a Chalkhill blue population of national significance, with over 800,000 individuals recorded in 2012.



‘Chalkhill blue northern strip’ 2012 showing close grazed sward (N. Hulme).

The site had a recent history of racehorse training, hence the name. It was also being managed by a partial hay cut at the end of the summer. Crucial to the ecology of the site was the large population of rabbits, creating tightly grazed and disturbed ‘lawn’ areas dominated by thyme and legume species such as Horseshoe Vetch.

During the mid-2010s several changes occurred with the cessation of horse training and most significantly the near total extinction of rabbits due to myxomatosis and haemorrhagic disease. Although hay cutting continued, it could not re-create the effects of rabbit grazing with the loss of the tightly grazed lawns.



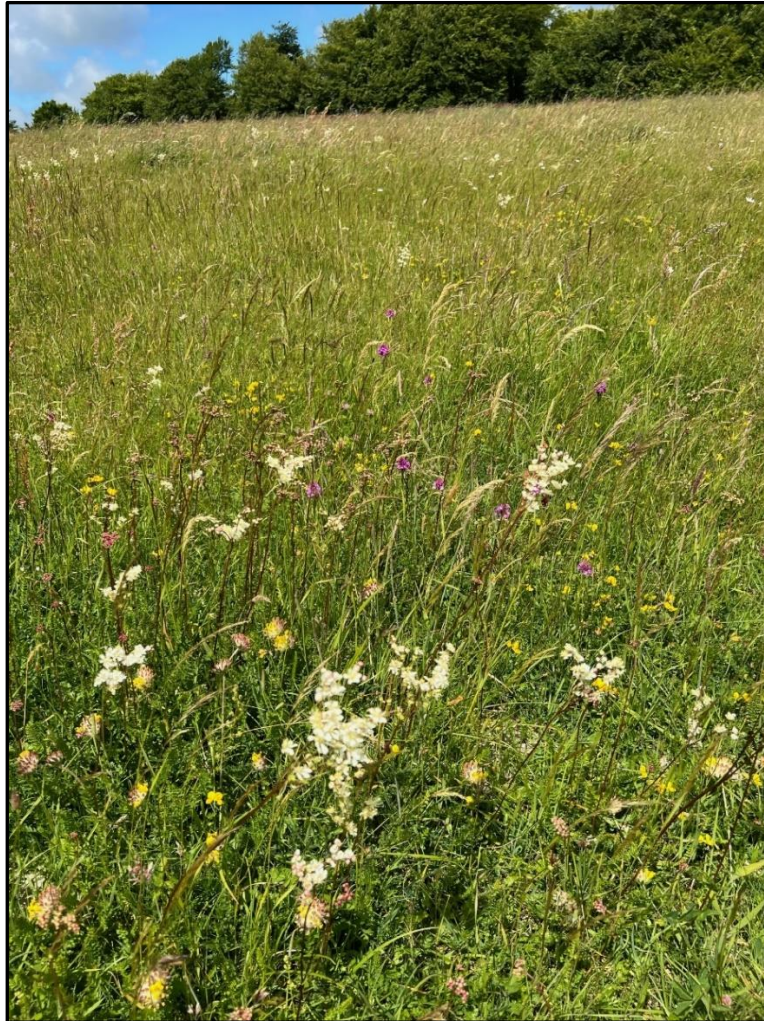
‘Chalkhill blue northern strip’ August 2018 showing gradual loss of grazed condition (N. Hulme).

Subsequent discussion centred on how to manage the site with the loss of rabbits. It was determined that a combination of hay cutting, fallow and most importantly, livestock grazing should contribute to the long-term management of the site. A ‘Pollard’ standard butterfly transect was set up in 2019 with the help of Seaford Natural History Society and Forestry England volunteers to monitor the butterfly population as a measure of the

effectiveness of the proposed management. Monitoring occurred in 2019 – 22 as a ‘baseline’ prior to restoration management.

An agreement was setup between the neighbouring farmer, who had traditionally taken the hay cut, Natural England and Forestry England to implement the management. The grazing infrastructure, including fencing the site into three units was completed in summer 2022. Cattle grazing of the middle and southern units began in August 2022 to take down the sward prior to partially re-seeding these two units in October 2022. A chalk grassland mix containing extra horseshoe and kidney vetch and bird’s foot trefoil was used.

A management group, including the grazier, Forestry England, Natural England, Butterfly Conservation, Buglife, SNHS and independent local naturalists and an experienced entomological habitat management specialist, has evolved to advise on the restoration management of the site, with two or three site walk overs a year to look at site conditions and make recommendations regarding grazing and management of the sward.



South unit sward June 2024 with kidney vetch and bird’s foot trefoil in foreground (S. Carr).

The site is now part way through restoration. As well as some hard grazing of the northern and southern units. The ‘Chalkhill blue northern strip’ was forage harvested in winter 2024, as it is outside of the grazing unit. ~ 60% of the now rank grassland and scrub was cut with the remaining areas of horseshoe vetch left uncut.

There appears to be a significant decline in Chalkhill blue numbers and this is probably due to a poor baseline habitat condition, combined with recent cold, wet and drought, periods.

This will be a continuing subject of discussion in the advisory group.

I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this project over the last five years.

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