

Habitat management for the Small Blue

Aim to maintain a mosaic of short and tall vegetation with a high density of flowering Kidney Vetch.

As Kidney Vetch is a short-lived poor competitor, regular provision of sparsely vegetated swards is required to enable seedlings to establish. At a landscape-scale, annual restoration or creation of new breeding habitat should be undertaken on rotation. Management is aimed at maximising the abundance of flowering Kidney Vetch and therefore some grassland management practices are generally incompatible with conserving the Small Blue (e.g. summer grazing and mowing). Tall grasses and/or topographical shelter (e.g. banks, ditches) are essential to provide male territories and roosting sites.

Grazing

Some Small Blue sites have no history of grazing, and grazing with the wrong type of livestock, at the wrong time of year, or at too high densities, can be disastrous. On brownfield sites grazing is often impractical and can be inappropriate unless the site is well vegetated.

Where appropriate, grassland habitat can be maintained by livestock grazing, creating more open swards, with broken bare ground providing suitable germination sites. Overgrazing should always be avoided, especially in the summer, as this can remove the flower heads where larvae are feeding as well as destroy roosting sites. Light cattle grazing in autumn and early winter is ideal, though year round extensive cattle grazing may suit large sites. Cattle hoof prints provide germination sites for the foodplant.

Pony and sheep grazing can result in a tight, closed sward, making germination less likely, and sheep target the palatable Kidney Vetch. For this reason only graze with sheep in autumn and early winter, with careful monitoring. Sheep tread Kidney Vetch seed into the ground encouraging germination, but as grazing the following year removes many of the young plants before flowering, only graze part of a site each year ensuring the Kidney Vetch flowers and sets seed before being grazed again. Rabbit grazing can be detrimental, as the flowers are palatable and plants may be uprooted.

Ground Disturbance

Periodic and/or patchy disturbance, especially on slopes, with a bulldozer, tractor, flail or hand tools can help maintain suitable breeding habitat. Regular disturbance on some sites is essential to maintain the supply of seedlings and continuity of flowering Kidney Vetch. Undertake ground disturbance on rotation at a relatively small-scale and on only a proportion of a site, avoiding known roosting areas and ensuring that species-rich swards are not damaged. The monitoring of Kidney Vetch seedling establishment and bare ground is a useful way of determining habitat continuity; the lack of seedlings in a closed turf is an early warning of future problems.

Habitat Creation

Breeding conditions for the Small Blue can be created by establishing butterfly banks or digging scrapes. These only provide suitable habitat for a few years and so should be created on a regular rotation. Ensure there are no archaeological features present and choose south-facing locations with nutrient poor soils or substrates, inverting any nutrient rich soil present in a butterfly bank. Use earth-moving machinery for large-scale operations but even small (1m x 1m) scrapes dug with hand tools can be beneficial. Sites can be allowed to colonise naturally, or seeded in autumn or winter with Kidney Vetch of local provenance harvested in late summer. Sowing at the top of a bank will encourage further seeding down slope. Plug-planting Kidney Vetch is less successful as plants may be dug up by rabbits and badgers, and require watering.

For more information on habitat creation techniques download the following Management Factsheets from Butterfly Conservation's website: *Creating a Butterfly Bank; Creating a Scrape; Seeding and Plug-planting for Butterflies.*

Connectivity

Due to the small size and increasing isolation of populations, the Small Blue is under threat. Local extinction events are probably commonplace due to the reliance on early successional habitat and in the past these would have been balanced by colonisations. However, due to loss and fragmentation of habitat, colonisations are becoming less frequent. Restoring connections between colonies, for example along disused railway lines, on derelict sites and quarries, on new road verges and along field margins, is vital for long-term conservation of this species. Even small habitat creation schemes such as butterfly banks and scrapes can provide important stepping stones in the landscape.

below Ideal brownfield habitat



**Butterfly
Conservation**

Saving butterflies, moths and our environment

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Butterfly Conservation. Company limited by guarantee, registered in England (2206468).

Registered Office: Manor Yard, East Lulworth, Wareham, Dorset, BH20 5QP
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Designed and produced by nectarcreative.com 01942 681648. Printed on 100% recycled stock.



Produced with funding from Natural England, SITA Trust, Butterfly Conservation Surrey & SW London, Warwickshire and SW Scotland Branches.