

A Gotlandic Meadow

WHAT IS A MEADOW?

A meadow is a remnant of former farming practice. Nowadays, winter feed for livestock is gathered from intensively managed grasslands, whereas in former times hay was harvested from large unploughed grasslands, that were mowed every year. This form of land use was called (wooded) hay meadows.

The History of Meadow Management

This way of living off the land dates back to the Iron Age, that is the era around the first century C.E. The expanse of meadowland probably reached its peak sometime in the 18th century. Then, an ordinary farm on Gotland comprised up to ten times as much meadowland as arable land. All this meadowland together was a large part of the agricultural land on Gotland. In the 19th and 20th centuries the whole system of agriculture was transformed. The meadows were ploughed up, converted into pastureland or abandoned and left to develop into forests. Today, only small remnants remain.

The Values of the Hay Meadow

A meadow today is in many cases a piece of land that has been used in the same manner for a very long period. Because of this, the presence of much of local heritage and parish history can be identified. This also means that traces of former settlements and farming boundaries are still in the same place. Perhaps the most renowned are the "giants' graves", the house foundations from Iron Age farmyards. The tools, methods, concepts and customs of meadow management are also parts of an important cultural heritage.

The long history of meadow management has also enabled a diversity of plants, animals and fungi to make the meadows their habitat. Many are adversely impacted by drastic changes like ploughing and deforestation, and have therefore become rare in today's landscape. The small meadows still in existence have become havens, hosting a richer throng of wildlife, which is difficult to find elsewhere.

The meadows are also frequently-visited nature spots, held dear for their beauty and their many values.

Welcome!

The meadow is well worth a visit in all seasons of the year. If you visit the meadow between May and July, prior to haymaking, you will see the thriving grass and herbs that are to be harvested. During this period, please take great care not to trample on the vegetation. If there is a track, stick to it. The rest of the year you may move more freely.



Gotländska Ångskommittén



Länsstyrelsen
GOTLANDS LÄN

CULTURAL TRACES



"Giants' Graves"

A "giant's grave" is actually a house foundation from the Iron Age, although in bygone days, people believed that they were giants' graves. Many of the settlements were probably abandoned around the 6th century. On Gotland there are still about 1,600 "giants' graves" dotted all across the landscape, although they are easiest to spot in the meadows.



Stone Wall Remains

Old barriers, which became obsolete long ago, have left their legacy by way of rows of stones. In bygone days, the animals were not enclosed in pens, but they needed to be kept out of arable land and meadows, hence the drystone walls. These remains mainly date back to the same period as the "giants' graves".



Sheds and Tools

Post-and-plank built sheds are found in some meadows. They are used for storing tools, benches and other things necessary for meadow management. Important tools include the scythe, rake and pollarding knife. For these things there are specific local idioms. All of this contributes to a vibrant meadow tradition.

Clearance

Clearance is carried out in autumn and winter. Smaller trees and overgrown branches are removed, along with brushwood. Clearance ensures firewood supply and improved growth of grass. It also facilitates haymaking. During some periods of our history, when most land was exploited to the utmost, extensive clearance was seldom necessary.

Aftermath Grazing

When haymaking and pollarding are complete, livestock are allowed to graze the luscious regrowth of grass. Grazing stunts bush growth and prevents the accumulation of old grass, which could otherwise impair fresh grass growth the following year. In bygone days, livestock always fed on aftermath grazing. Today it is less common.



Spring Raking

The annual cycle of the meadow begins in April-May, when the Wood anemone is in bloom. On Gotland this herb is also called the raking flower since it signals that it's now time to collect and burn fallen branches, twigs and leaves. The removal of leaves in springtime stimulates the growth of grass. Equally important is the removal of fallen branches and twigs, to make mowing easier.

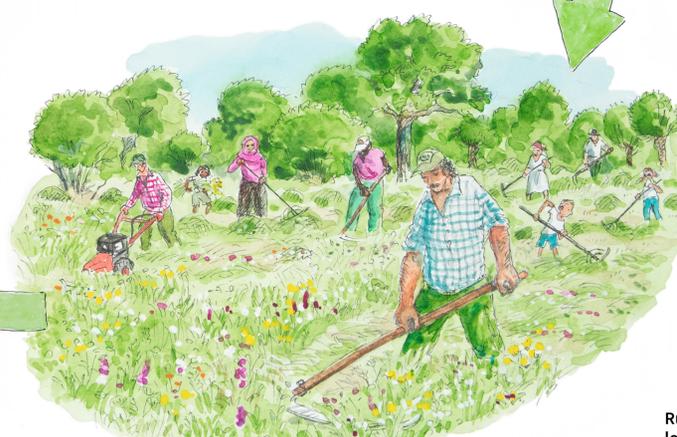


A Year in the Meadow



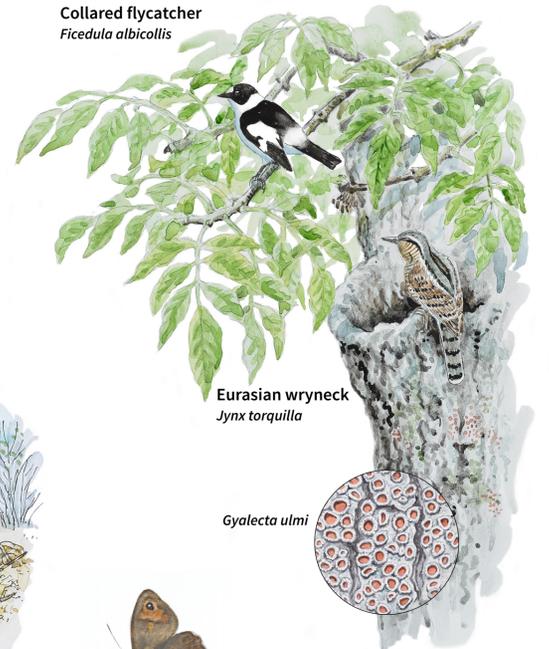
Pollarding

Pollarding follows on after haymaking. Branches and foliage are cut from different deciduous trees, e.g. ash and linden. Leaves are harvested, dried and used as winter feed (tree hay). Pollarding is normally carried out at three to seven year intervals.



Haymaking

Towards the end of the height of summer, when the herb Greater yellow-rattle has gone to seed, it is time to harvest the hay. Grass and herbs are mown and left to dry in the more open and sunny glades of the meadow. In pre-industrial farming, the meadow grass was cut with a scythe. Today different types of mowing machines are often used.



Collared flycatcher
Ficedula albicollis

Eurasian wryneck
Jynx torquilla

Gyalecta ulmi



Meadow brown
Maniola jurtina

Six-spot burnet
Zygaena filipendulae



Shaggy bracket
Inonotus hispidus



Lurid bolete
Suillellus luridus



Devil's bolete
Rubroboletus satanas



Waxcaps



Rufous-shouldered longhorn beetle
Anaglyptus mysticus



Quaking-grass
Briza media

Devil's-bit Scabious
Succisa pratensis



Greater Yellow-rattle
Rhinanthus angustifolius



Tawny Sedge
Carex hostiana



Crested Cow-wheat
Melampyrum cristatum



Viper's-grass
Scorzonera humilis



Fragrant Orchid
Gymnadenia conopsea



Small-leaved Elm
Ulmus minor