

# The Importance of Godalming's Lammas Lands: A Local Perspective

by Neil F. Willis (May 2024)

## Introduction

Freshwater flood meadows are one of the rarest semi-natural habitats that exist within the UK, they have a long history dating back over 1,000 years. Before domesticated cattle were commonplace, long extinct indigenous herbivores would have grazed these areas and created the early flood meadows. Early cattle farmers were quick to notice the good quality of grassland and medicinal value of these meadows; they often used the meadows as areas to heel poorly livestock.



*The Lammas Lands*

Due to land use changes, particularly over the last 200 years, much of this species rich habitat has been lost. Since the 1930s, approximately 97% of species rich flower meadows have been lost in the UK (1), including many areas of freshwater flood meadows. The reasons for this loss are all too familiar in modern day conservation with the expansion of urban areas, intensification of agricultural practices, pollution and drainage all contributing to the loss of this habitat. There is only a fraction of this type of land left along UK rivers. Approximately 1.6 million hectares still remains and, of that total, only 3,000 hectares is species rich grassland; these remaining areas are constantly threatened from human activity. The traditional low intensity farming methods that were historically used to manage flood meadows, created species rich ecosystems with a large number of different wildlife species being present. The few remaining well-managed examples of this type of land still represent amazing habitats. These facts are well established, yet these habitats are still being lost to human activity, disturbance of sites and under valuation of important sites, reflecting on-going trends of habitat loss in the UK and around the world.

The Wey Valley, in southwest Surrey, has several fine examples of flood meadows along the River Wey. Of particular interest is the stretch between Guildford and Eashing, parts of which (the Wey Valley Meadows) are included in the **Site of Special Scientific Interest** (SSSI) designation that exists along some areas of the valley (2, 3). A number of the meadows in this area are managed from a conservation perspective and the landowners manage, or receive grants to manage, these meadows in a sensitive manner. However, several meadows that are of high biodiversity value along the valley have not been given the same designation or have a lesser designation.

The **Godalming Lammas Lands** comprise of four flood meadows totalling 31.8 hectares in size (4). They are intersected by Catteshall Lane between Almshouse Meadow and Catteshall Meadow, by Bridge Street between Catteshall Meadow and Overgone Meadow and by Hell Ditch between Overgone Meadow and Hell Ditch Meadow (see Figure 1, below). All of the meadows are bordered by the River Wey on the southern edge and Hells Ditch on the northern side of the site. The meadows are mostly owned and completely managed by Waverley Borough Council (WBC) (4). Management of the land is undertaken by WBC countryside rangers, which includes cattle grazing in the summer months. Grazing, a traditional management technique, is helping conserve and encourage a good mosaic of habitats and associated species which inhabit such areas.

These meadows have long been recognised as sites of high importance for their biodiversity. Waverley Borough Council designates them an **Area of Strategic Visual Importance (ASVI)** (5). They are also designated as **Sites of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCI)**, an **Area of High Archaeological Potential** and areas of **Open Access** under the countryside and **Rights of Way Act 2000** (4).

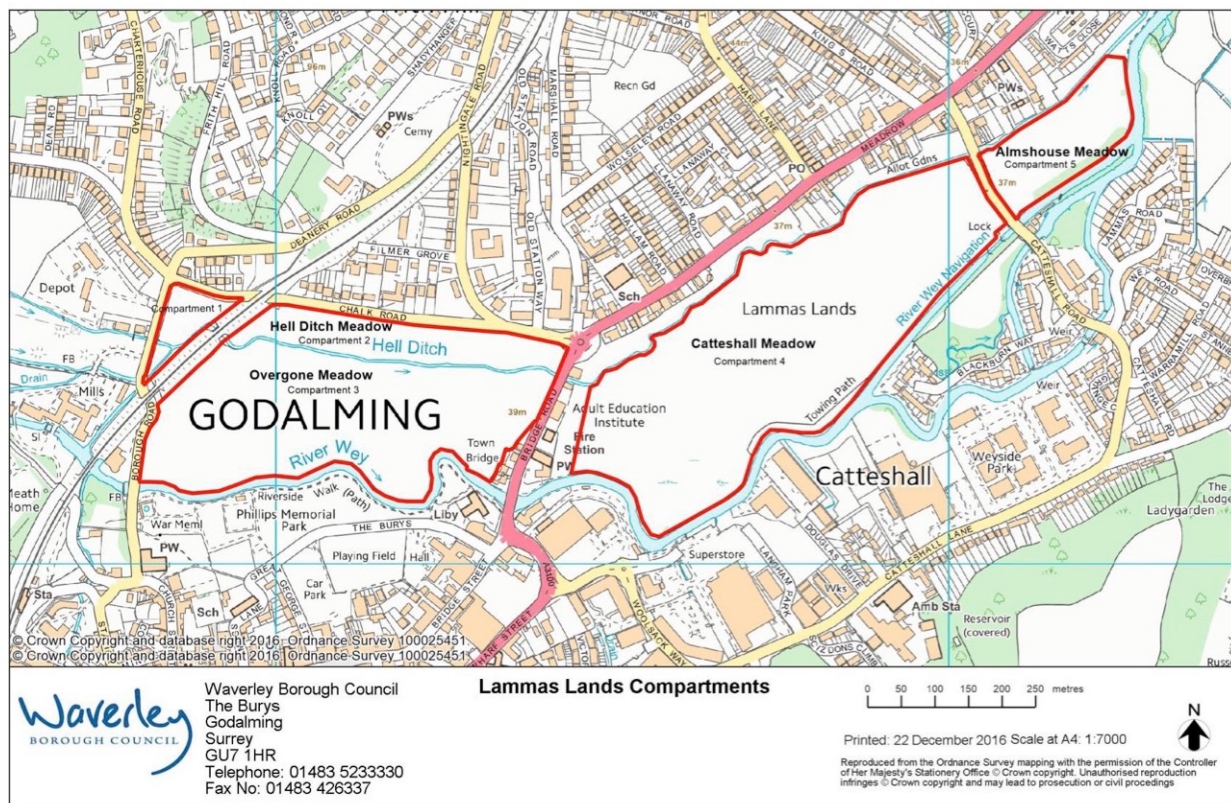


Figure 1: A Map of the Lammas Land (4)

## The Biodiversity of the Lammas Lands

The wildlife species of Godalming Lammas Lands have been well documented for many years and a wealth of species have been recorded, some of which are of national interest due to their rarity; there is a notable list of Red Data Species found throughout the various wildlife groups. This highlights the importance and value of these sites, as well as the positive impact of the sensitive management techniques being employed – they are starting to pay dividends in encouraging species to prosper and recover in some areas.

In this article, we look at some of the wildlife groups and species recorded across the meadows which highlights the importance of these sites. It should be recognised that the examples highlighted in this article, are only a sample of the species present and do not tell the whole story of the site's high biodiversity value and full range of species. Data of various surveys undertaken are all held at Waverley Borough Council (6) and show the richness of the site's biodiversity.

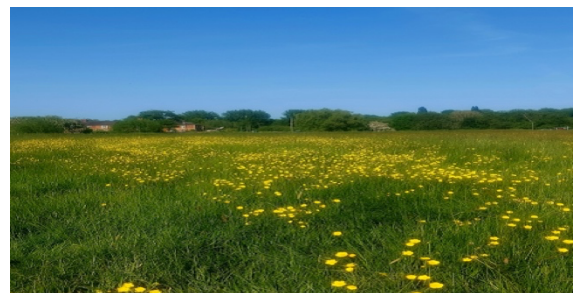
## Plants

The diversity of plant life on the meadow is one of the reasons why these meadows are of vital importance to the local area. The flora of the meadows is not only aesthetically pleasing, particularly in spring and early summer months, but is also very diverse. In the different micro-habitats found within the meadows, 108 flowering species were recorded in a survey from 1994 (4), including ten Red Data Book species (4). Within this total there are 30 National Vegetation Classification communities (4), highlighting the richness of these sites.



*Meadow Saxifrage on Catteshall Meadow May 2023. Photo by N.F.Willis.*

The use of cattle grazing is an important way of improving & sustaining the condition of the meadows. It also greatly improves growing conditions for many wildflower species, enhancing floristic diversity; this, in turn, provides vital food for the invertebrates. Catteshall Meadow had not been grazed for a number of years up until 2022. In the two years since grazing has been reinstated, there have already been positive impacts in the swards of grassland, including over 150 flowering Meadow Saxifrage plants recorded in 2024 (7) and, with the opening out of some of the fenland habitat, some wintering **Common Snipe** (*G. gallinago*) have been attracted to the area (8). The continued grazing of the sites will have on-going beneficial impact on the plant communities of these meadows, which in turn will provide a vital basis for the whole ecosystems that occur.



*Meadow Buttercups on Catteshall Meadow, Godalming May 2023. Photo by N. F. Willis*

## Invertebrates

A visit to these meadows on a hot summer day will quickly highlight the importance of these sites to the local invertebrate populations. It is not only the most commonly encountered groups such as butterflies and dragonflies that are present in good numbers, there is also a wide range of less common species. This again highlights the richness of the habitat and its contribution as a vital base in the local ecological food chain.

Some of the more common groups of insects, such as butterflies, are now being monitored; a weekly transect was set up in 2023 and there are some plans to run a moth trap on a few evenings in the summer of 2024 (9). The latter group of insects are very good indicator of the general health of a habitat and the results of these studies will provide some interesting information.

There are a number of specialist species that inhabit the micro-habitats that occur across these meadows such as freshwater and cow dung specialists. This includes seven Red Data Species (6) in a total of 227 insect and spiders species that were recorded in 2002 across the three main meadows (4).

The decline in invertebrates across the world is a well established major environmental issue that is having a knock-on effect throughout the natural food chain. As mentioned above, the re-introduction of cattle grazing across the meadows has already had a positive impact on the flora of the sites, with a consequential increase in some species of flying insects. Additionally, cattle dung also attracts a number of specialist beetle species. This is a positive impact of the management policy adopted by the Waverley rangers and is beneficial in increasing the diversity across the sites whilst maintaining and improving the condition of the Lammas Lands.

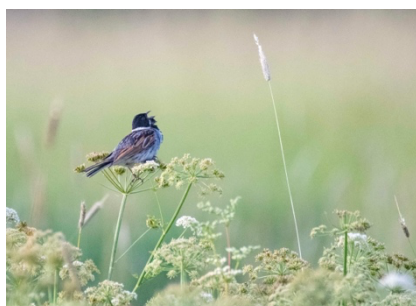
## Birds

Birds are probably the best recorded wildlife group that use these sites with records dating back many years (6). The meadows continue to be a vital habitat for many species including a number of nationally declining and scarce species; 17 Amber listed and 8 Red listed species have been observed (4). This fact alone emphasises the importance of the site for the local bird population.

The meadows importance for birds is also shown by the fact that there is year round use of the sites with notable species breeding including: **Reed Bunting** (*Emberiza schoeniclus*) (10); **Sedge Warbler** (*Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*) (11); **Greenfinch** (*Carduelis chloris*) (12); **Linnet** (*Linaria cannabina*) (13); **Common Grasshopper Warbler** (*Locustella naevia*) (11); and, a healthy population of **Common Whitethroat** (*Curruca communis*) (14) and **Common**



*Common Kingfisher (Alcedo atthis); this pair bred by Overgone Meadow. Photo by R. Fisher.*

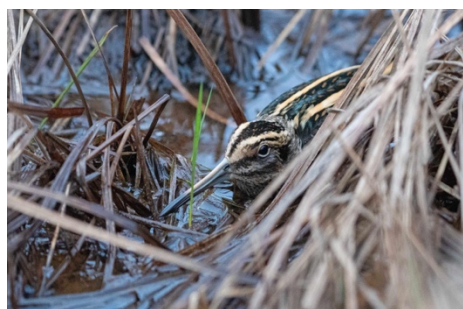


*Male Reed Bunting in song on Catteshall Meadow. Photo by E. Stubbs.*

**Kingfisher** (*Alcedo atthis*) (15) has bred on the riverbank along Overgone Meadow. The summer months also provide vital feeding areas for **Western House Martin** (*Delichon urbicum*) (16); **Common Swift** (*Apus apus*) (11); **Grey** (*Motacilla cinerea*) (17), **Pied Wagtail** (*M. yarelli*) (18), **House Sparrow** (*Passer domesticus*) (19) and **Common Starling** (*Sturnus vulgaris*) (20) which are attracted to the area by the concentration of aerial invertebrates and the

species that are present due to the presence of summer grazing by the cattle.

The winter months provide important feeding and roosting areas for **Common Snipe** (*Gallinago Gallinago*) (8), which can number up to 40 individuals, as well as a couple of the rarer **Jack Snipe** (*Lymnocyrtes minimus*) (21), in the wet fen areas of the meadows. There is also a winter roost of up to 80 **Linnet**s (*L. cannabina*) (13) that roost in the patches of brambles around the edge of Catteshall Meadow. **Barn Owls** (*Tyto alba*) (11) use the meadows to hunt in and can occasionally be seen at various times of the year. In total, over 100 species have been recorded since 2020, highlighting how important these sites are for the local bird populations.



**Jack Snipe** on Catteshall Meadow, January 2024. Photo by E. Stubbs.



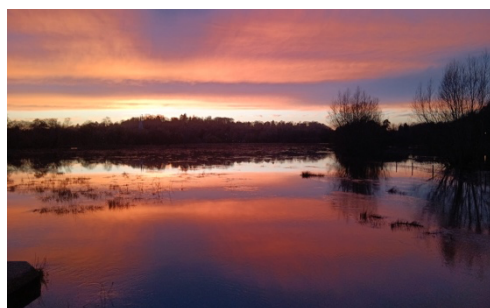
**Barn Owl** on Catteshall Meadow, February 2024. Photo E. Stubbs

Historically a number of Red Data Species would have bred in the Godalming Lammas Lands, this includes species such as **Common Snipe** (*G. gallinago*) (8), **Northern Lapwing** (*Vanellus vanellus*) (11) and **Skylark** (*Alauda arvensis*) (11), but where the loss of habitat has occurred and human disturbance increased, these species have been mostly lost to the local area, apart from the odd pair of Skylark.

The fact that these meadows are still supporting some important and viable populations of many declining species again validates their importance on a national level and increasingly on an international level as many other countries are experiencing similar population and habitat losses.

## Mammals

This is a difficult group to record without a sustained effort. Most records are of casual observations, hence this group is almost certainly under-recorded with very few records available to collate data from. However, even with such few records, the species that have been recorded again demonstrate the importance of the sites.



**Overgone Meadow**, one of the original proposed cycle boardwalk routes, February 2024. Photo by D. Saker

One of the most notable recent sightings (March 2024) involved a **European Water Vole** (*Arvicola amphibious*) observed in the River Wey adjacent to Catteshall Meadow (Unrecorded sighting); a very notable sighting given their Red Data categorisation – they have been officially classed as extinct in Surrey since 2008 (22). The vole was observed during a time of flood and its presence raises a number of questions. Where did this individual originate from and is there an unknown population anywhere in the area? There have been some reintroduction schemes in Sussex that have been doing well - it is

possible that this sighting is related. It is clear that there is some good habitat available in the general area for this species and they were almost certainly present in the past; this situation will be monitored carefully.

The most obvious species present is the **Roe Deer** (*Capreolus capreolus*). This species has become more numerous in the last ten years with up to 8 being observed on Catteshall Meadow in the Winter of 2022/23 (23,24). They have started to breed in the area with a doe & a fawn noted in Almshouse Meadow in June 2020. If they get too numerous, their presence could possibly have a negative effect on sensitive vegetation, although there will be a limiting factor with the amount of available habitat. Typically, they are less obvious when the cattle are in the meadows, although they were observed in Almshouse Meadow in 2023 alongside cattle. Sadly, there have been a number of incidences over recent years where off-leash dogs have chased and harassed the deer including one that was allegedly killed.

There is a good population of **European Moles** (*Talpa europaeus*) which become more obvious during times of flood when they move to higher ground where possible (25). A **Grey Heron** (*Ardea cineria*) was observed catching one in flood water on Overgone Meadow in January 2023 (11). **Brown Rats** (*Rattus norvegicus*) are common along the river and are regularly observed particularly in the Philips Memorial park opposite Overgone Meadow. Other reported sightings include a few notable species: this includes the **Short Tailed Vole** (*Microtus agrestis*), which are found in the open grassland areas of the meadows and provide a vital food source for the **Common Kestrel** (*Falco tinnuculus*) and the **Barn Owl** (*Tyto alba*). **Weasels** (*Mustela nivalis*) have also been observed on Catteshall Meadow on a few occasions, including an unrecorded sighting of two individuals that were fighting each other in April 2013. Other small mammal species are present, particularly in the wooded areas on the edges of these meadows where **Common Shrew** (*Sorex Araneus*) have been observed (26,26). There are also certainly some mice species present.

One of the most numerous species that occurs on these meadows is **Soprano Pipistrelle** (*Pipistrellus pygmaeus*) which have been observed in numbers of up to 30+ (27) feeding over the 4 meadows with potentially more species being present. This species was identified with the aid of a bat detector in 2018 and further investigation would probably discover other species. There are plans to carry out more bat survey work in 2024. The fact that they are present in these numbers also suggests that there is a good food supply readily available which shows the wealth of the meadow and the adjacent river also.

## Conclusion

Habitat loss is the number one reason for loss of wildlife species and a reduction of biodiversity across the UK. The Godalming Lammas Lands are an essential wildlife resource for Waverley with a very high biodiversity value.

Waverley is the largest borough in Surrey and the activities of the Waverley Rangers, who manage the sites for WBC, are improving the biodiversity value further, by employing

effective management techniques including the re-introduction of grazing. This is a positive step, although more needs to be done, including the possibility of increased resourcing for this land and wildlife management to promote biodiversity.

Other initiatives, such as regular Wildlife Walks in Catteshall meadows, organised by a local environmental charity What Next, are also important in raising awareness and understanding of the importance of the Lammas Lands in the local population.

Ultimately, the most effective option would be to make the case for the Lammas Lands having a fully protected status. This article is a contribution to this case.

***Disclaimer:** this is a personal perspective of one of our What Next volunteers, Neil Willis, who is a passionate advocate for the protection of The Lammas Lands.*

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## **Conclusion**

From the reasons looked at and highlighted in this short report it is very obvious that the Godalming Lammas Lands are very important wildlife sites and are of a very high biodiversity value on a national level and increasingly of an international importance.