

Cumbria Seed Bank Project

(November 2024 – November 2026)



Funded by National Lottery Heritage Fund and delivered by Cumbria Wildlife Trust (CWT), Cumbria Seed Bank project is a two year project that aims to reverse the decline of rare and iconic wild flowers of grassland habitats in Cumbria.

Aim of project

Working in conjunction with Kew Millennium Seed Bank, the project will focus on the collection, storage and sowing of seed from rare and declining grassland species that are found in Cumbria. Seed will be held at CWT's Cumbria Seed Bank, at Gosling Sike nursery in Carlisle, with the aim to preserve the genetic diversity of native plant species.

With the help of farmers, landowners and tenants, we will look to re-introduce rare plants in suitable locations, and build strongholds of less common species, using seed collected as part of the project. The aim is not only to introduce harder to establish plants that are missing from grasslands; but to also use this project to inform future work to safeguard vulnerable populations of plant species in Cumbria, so that these wildflower species are not lost forever.

Part of this project will focus on providing specialist grassland training by leading ecologists and botanists, with the aim to provide a larger pool of skilled surveyors and volunteers. To address the projected shortfall of botanical skills in Cumbria in the future, we will look to significantly increase the number of young volunteers by providing opportunities for people under 25 years of age.

Project area

The geographical focus of this project is on two areas, South Lakeland with a suite of habitats around Windermere, and the Westmorland Dales, part of the Yorkshire Dales National Park. Work will be targeted on a network of County Wildlife Sites (CWS) across the area, as these sites are known to be of importance for wildlife. Alongside these a range of other suitable grasslands sites may also be considered where there is opportunity.

Why is this project needed?

Many of our once common wild flowers found in our grasslands and wider countryside are disappearing, and a major study by the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (2023) has found that an estimated 53% of all native plants have declined, with species-rich grasslands amongst the most threatened habitats in Britain.

Whilst Cumbria remains a UK stronghold for species-rich grasslands, even here fragmentation into small, isolated sites has resulted in a significant reduction of species. Data compiled by Cumbria Biodiversity Data Centre in 2018 states that less than 500 ha of species rich grassland remains in Cumbria. Other research by Cumbria Flora Group (2014) suggests that over a sixteen year period, formerly rich sites now have a lower level of plant diversity than in 1996, and that some species which used to thrive in well-known locations are no longer present. The reasons for the decline are changes in farming practices, forestry, unsympathetic treatment of roadside verges, tourism, and industrial developments.

In addition to this, there has been a significant reduction in students studying botany due to a decline in the number of universities offering degrees in the subject; falling from nine courses in 2009 to two courses for the 2023-24 undergraduate intake. Most county recorders in Cumbria are over fifty. There is an urgent need to facilitate, encourage and train a new generation of volunteer botanists.



Wood crane's-bill
Geranium Sylvaticum
Image credit: Ali White.

The species

The focus is on rare plant species that were once common in Cumbria but are now in serious decline in the county. These were an integral part of the county's cultural and natural heritage, and all listed in the Cumbria Local Nature Recovery Strategy as priority species. Species include:

Bistort	Wood cranesbill	Grey green sedges
Globeflower	Melancholy thistle	Betony
Lady's mantle	Wood bitter vetch	Great burnet
Spignel	Devil's-bit scabious	Dyer's greenweed
Marsh marigold	Saw-wort	



Devil's-bit scabious
Succisa Pratensis
Image credit: Ali White.

The inclusion of devil's-bit scabious will also benefit the marsh fritillary butterfly, for which it is the primary larval food plant. The marsh fritillary is a priority Biodiversity Action Plan species.

Our objectives

The Cumbria Seed Bank project will focus on addressing the decline of grassland wildflower species in Cumbria. This will be achieved by:

- **Seed collection and storage:** Seed will be carefully collected (with permission) by staff and trained volunteers, cleaned, catalogued and stored with care in the seed bank. Support and training on collection of seed from these plants will be provided by Kew. Collected seed samples will be sent to the Kew Millennium Seed Bank and stored on site in Cumbria for long-term species security. Some of the seed will also be propagated at the adjoining plant nursery with the help of volunteers, to be used as plug plants for the project.
- **Establishing strongholds:** Working closely with partners, landowners, farmers and tenants, and by carrying out botanical surveys and soil samples and determining ongoing sympathetic management, we will identify suitable sites. Once grown to plug plants, the plants will be planted out on conservation days. Up to 40,000 plants will be grown as part of the project, helping to boost wildflower populations at sites across the project area.
- **Provide training and volunteer opportunities:** Specialist training courses will include species identification of UKHAB grassland habitats, specific species ID e.g. alchemilla spp. and eyebright species, botanical survey skills, seed collection, sowing and growing rare species. Besides our regular dedicated volunteers, there are opportunities for young people to participate in conservation work parties, weekend volunteer sessions, and Young Environmental Leaders residential. Events will be targeted through Young Farmers, National Park Young Rangers, Duke of Edinburgh Awards, alongside partners including YHA, YMCA Lakeside and National Trust. Saturday volunteering sessions will also be held at Gosling Sike nursery.

Opportunities

Our CWT Grassland Team will work closely with partners, landowners and tenants to look at ways in which this project can directly help support stewardships and SFI options, such as [GRH6: Manage priority habitat species-rich grassland](#) and provide evidence for reporting.

As part of this project, there is opportunity to receive a grassland botanical survey and soil testing per parcel, and restoration/management plans (PA1 or equivalent worth £1,200 per holding, plus soil testing £40/parcel) and up to £1,500 per parcel for restoration works i.e. the addition of rare or less common plants species. All of this will all be available to landowners/ farmers at no cost, on provision that a 5-year landowner agreement is in place. The agreement will support species-rich grassland and hay making options of SFI and CS agreements, however you do not need to be in a stewardship agreement to be eligible for of this project.

The landowner agreement is required by National Lottery Heritage Fund to ensure that the necessary ongoing grassland management is agreed for 5 years, following on from restoration work. For more information please contact **Tanya St. Pierre**, Grassland & Pollinator Team Manager, **077418 58375** or email tanyastp@cumbriawildlifetrust.org.uk