

10. Surveying for Plants and Animals



This sheet will explain how to survey for wildlife and make a biological record. This allows you to learn more about your site and how it is changing over time, it also contributes to our Burial Ground Atlas, which includes all burial grounds in England and Wales.

A burial ground can be managed very well with little surveying of the plants and animals present, but it can be interesting to learn more. Caring for God's Acre are working in partnership with the National Biodiversity Network (NBN) who collate millions of biological records, making them available to everyone through the NBN Atlas. Together we have created a Burial Ground Atlas so that individuals, burial ground managers and also those making planning decisions can see what wildlife has been recorded in a burial ground. This helps them to make informed decisions which take consideration of biodiversity and nature conservation.

Learning about plants and animals also gives information for leaflets or talks and can lead to a great sense of achievement as wildflowers, reptiles or breeding birds increase over the years.

Digital photography has made identification much easier than it was. If in doubt take photos of the plant, nest, butterfly or dropping that is puzzling you. There are online systems such as iSpot that can help you identify species from a photo (see useful contacts).

SURVEYING FOR PLANTS

Caring for God's Acre have created a simple tool to help you survey grassland within burial grounds called The Burial Ground Botanical Companion. This survey tool is designed to be used by people who are not botanists, but do have some knowledge of plant types; perhaps keen gardeners? It involves counting the numbers of different plants within an area, without identifying what they are. This is followed by making a list of all the plants which you can identify. Please download the survey from the Resources page on our website or buy the booklet from our online shop, and have a go. The Field Studies Council fold-out charts are



helpful for getting going, as is The Wildflower Key. We'd love to hear how you get on!

Typical plants of coarse and tussocky grassland include:

False oat grass, cocksfoot, Yorkshire fog and hogweed. In an area of tussocky grass these plants are a sign of good management. If, however, these are increasing in your long grass areas year on year then consider mowing a bit more often (see sheet A2, Caring for Grassland).

Typical plants of fine grassland include:

Finer meadow grasses like sweet vernal grass and crested dog's tail. Flowers include bird's foot trefoil, stitchwort, cowslip, betony, ox-eye daisy, lady's bedstraw, scabious and speedwell. If numbers of these are staying constant or increasing, then give yourselves a pat on the back; your grass cutting regime is working.

Fungi are also good indicators of old grassland and thrive in close mown grass. Record the fungi present on a site and, if you cannot identify them, then take photos of the fungus when fully emerged, ideally showing both the top and underside.



Early Marsh Orchid

Contact the Botanical Society of the Britain and Ireland (BSBI) and British Mycological Society. Is there a local group who would be interested in visiting your burial site?

If you cannot identify something then take a photo of it, including as much of the plant as possible (leaves, flowers, seeds). Give it your own name (e.g. purple flower, photo 1) until you find someone who can identify it for you.

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SURVEYING FOR ANIMALS

Amphibians and reptiles

Slow worms do not often come out into the open but find places to receive the warmth of the sun where they can stay out of sight. Put down a 'cover object' such as a piece of corrugated tin, old carpet, plywood or roofing felt. Place this in partial sun, away from visited areas, within an area of tussocky or long grass, near a compost heap or deadwood pile. The cover object needs to be 2ft square or larger. Lift up regularly and check to see if slow worms or other creatures are underneath. All reptiles are easier to see in spring and autumn or early in the morning on a hot summer's day as it is at these cooler times that they need to bask.

Grass snakes lay their eggs in compost heaps. When you come to empty the compost in the autumn keep an eye out for hatched grass snake eggs which are whitish in colour and leathery. Count eggshells, recording numbers of both hatched and unhatched eggs. You may also find the sloughed skin of a grass snake or slow worm.

See if there is a local Amphibian and Reptile Group with members who might be interested in visiting your burial ground.

Mammals

You may not see any mammals within a burial ground, but you can often see tracks and signs.

Look out for: footprints in soft mud or snow, bat droppings below eaves, 'runs' or paths through long grass (these become visible after cutting), gaps and paths through hedges, hair caught on hedges and used in bird's nests.

Contact your local Mammal Society and see if they would be interested in visiting your site and perhaps doing some live mammal trapping or setting up a mammal tunnel to record tracks.

Birds

See sheet B4, Swifts and Other Birds, for surveying suggestions. Contact your county bird recorder, wildlife trust or the RSPB to enquire whether there is a local enthusiast to help.

Butterflies and Other Invertebrates

Butterflies are relatively easy to identify and can give you an indication of how good your burial site is for other invertebrates too. A site with a good range and number of



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butterflies is likely to host a great many other species as well. Butterfly Conservation run an annual survey in the summer, the Big Butterfly Count. Have a look on their website to learn more and take part.

Tip; check flower heads such as knapweeds for resting or feeding butterflies.



Redwing

Making a biological record

Whether you have noticed wildlife when you are strolling through a burial ground or have carried out a survey, you can make a biological record. You don't need to be an expert; in fact it is useful to have records of common species as well as rarities. Have you seen a yew tree or holly bush, a magpie, a squirrel or a mole hill? If so, you can record them.

To make a biological record you need to make a note of 4 things:

What you have seen, no need to know the Latin name, English is fine.

When you saw it, make a note of the date.

Where you saw it, which burial ground were you visiting?

Who saw it, we need to know your name. You can choose to include contact details if you want which will allow experts to get in touch if they need to know more.

Please have a look at the iRecord system on the Caring for God's Acre website and see if recording this way works for you. If not, then you can email your records or put a sheet of a notebook in the post. Why not also share the records with your local wildlife trust or county recording scheme? Provided you include 'what, when, where and who' all methods will feed into our Burial Ground Atlas, although the iRecord system is the quickest.



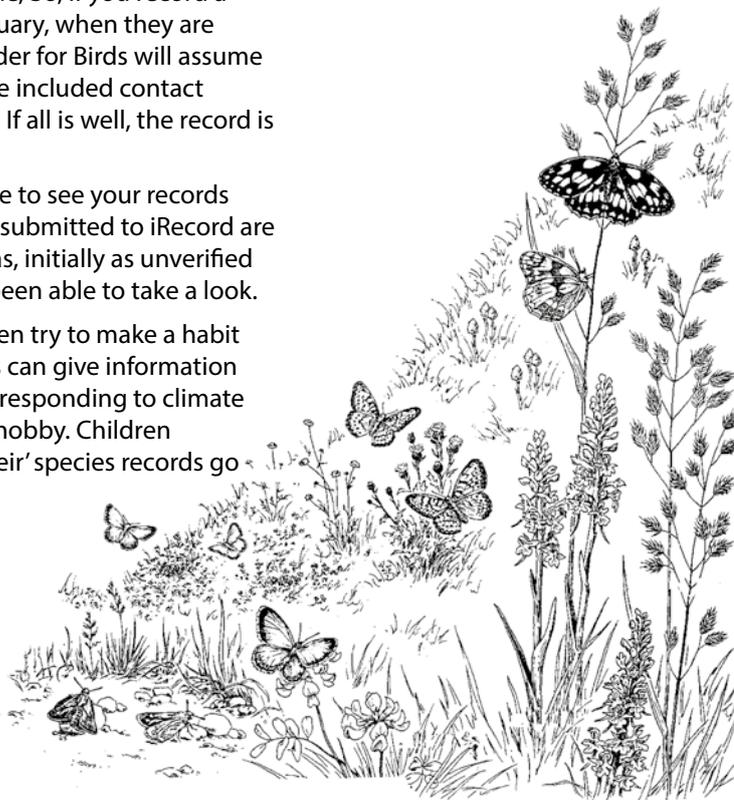
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What Next?

All biological records are checked by experts (County Recorders) who are usually volunteers. These people are experienced at identification and make sure that mistakes are not being made. So, if you record a migratory bird like a swallow in Cumbria in January, when they are overwintering in Africa, then the County Recorder for Birds will assume a mistake is likely to have happened. If you have included contact details with your record, they may get in touch. If all is well, the record is approved, otherwise known as 'verified'.

If you use our iRecord system then you'll be able to see your records appear on the Burial Ground Atlas. The records submitted to iRecord are periodically uploaded to the Burial Ground Atlas, initially as unverified records and then verified when an expert has been able to take a look.

If you visit your local burial ground regularly then try to make a habit of jotting down what you see. Seasonal records can give information on the arrival of the seasons, on how wildlife is responding to climate change and can become a fascinating lifetime hobby. Children particularly love making records and seeing 'their' species records go onto a national system.



Useful contacts

Amphibian and Reptile Groups – UK, www.arguk.org
Botanical Society of the British Isles, www.bsbi.org.uk
Butterfly Conservation, www.butterfly-conservation.org
Caring for God's Acre, www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk
iNaturalist, www.iNaturalist.org
National Biodiversity Network Burial Ground Atlas, <https://burialgrounds.nbnatlas.org>
Mammal Society, www.mammal.org.uk

Useful reading

The Field Studies Council fold-out charts are an excellent tool for starting to identify and survey wildlife. Visit our website to order a copy of our fold-out chart 'Guide to Wildlife of Burial Grounds'.

The Burial Ground Botanical Companion, Caring for God's Acre, available to buy or download via our website.

The Wildflower Key, Francis Rose, Frederick Warne Books.



Bank Vole