

HS2: Parks and Amenity Grasslands

Definition

For the purposes of this statement parks, amenity grasslands and city squares are those areas of open space which are, by and large, publicly accessible or managed primarily for formal recreation. Formal parks, sports pitches, landscaped areas around institutions, and school playing fields are some examples. This audit excludes golf courses, as many of these will include habitats covered by woodland, grassland and heathland audits.

In this audit parks are defined as those amenity open spaces which are formal, managed landscapes consisting of extensive mown grassland, avenues of trees, copses, shrubberies, flower beds and formal water features. This category includes the larger city squares. Some parks may also support quite large areas of semi-natural habitat such as woodland. This audit does not include 'parkland' such as old deer parks, wood pasture or 'old' parks with many mature trees (e.g. Greenwich Park). These parkland areas are covered by audit HA2: Open Landscapes with Ancient/Old Trees.

London's Parks and Amenity Grassland Resource

There have not been any London-wide surveys of this resource and therefore there are no comprehensive figures for the extent of parks, playing fields, sports pitches and other amenity grassland.

Previous London Planning Advisory Committee (LPAC) surveys which have attempted to identify the amount of publicly accessible land (often referred to as parks) do not provide useful data for this statement. LPAC's hierarchy of open spaces includes land which falls outside the definition of parks applied here, for example Hounslow Heath is recorded as a Regional Park although it consists largely of semi-natural habitats which are covered by separate audits this document (such as Heathland, HA6).

An approximate figure is available for the amount of this habitat present in London as a whole. A sample of aerial photographs of Greater London which was analysed by the London Ecology Unit in 1992, suggested that 'parks' as defined by this audit comprise 8% (12,500ha) of London's total land area. 'Sports pitches' cover approximately 3% (4,700 ha) of the total land area, 'grounds of schools & other institutions' 1.5% (2,400 ha) and 'common green spaces around flats' a further 1.1 % (1,700 ha).

Therefore, the total figure for the extent of parks and amenity grasslands in London is approximately 21,000 ha - 13% of Greater London's surface area.

Nature Conservation Importance

Parks, playing fields and amenity open space together constitute one of the largest categories of habitat/land use in Greater London. Many sites have relatively little intrinsic nature conservation value (i.e. they do not often support any rare or uncommon habitats or species), mainly because of the need to implement fairly intensive maintenance regimes. However, playing fields, formal parks and amenity space (in addition to private gardens) are places where many Londoners have most frequent contact with the natural world. Unsurprisingly, formal parks assume greater nature conservation importance in the more urbanised central areas of London where there is far less semi-natural habitat.

Playing fields in particular are often regarded as inimical to wildlife, because of the need for very regular mowing of the playing areas. However, even these fairly featureless ‘green deserts’ support a variety of common bird species (gulls, starling, blackbird and pied wagtail, for example) and occasionally uncommon species such as lapwing and golden plover. In recent years, both of the latter species have established daytime roosts on school playing fields adjacent to the Chase Nature Reserve in Dagenham.

Formal parks (and amenity open space) tend to support a wider range of biodiversity, because they have a greater degree of structural diversity (i.e. trees and shrubberies are scattered throughout the mown grassland) and many support a diversity of habitats including ponds, lakes and copses.

The vegetation of many formal parks is comprised mostly of non-native species and common, ruderal or ‘weed’ species. However, formal parks which have been established upon former meadows or parkland often contain relics of these habitats, such as old oak trees, copses and hedgerows and plants such as birds-foot trefoil *Lotus corniculatus* which survive in less intensively managed areas of grass.

Typical bird species of formal parks include blue tit, great tit, pied wagtail, song thrush, blackbird and robin. Where there is greater habitat diversity and lakes, ponds or mature trees occur, additional species such as great spotted woodpecker, long-tailed tit, moorhen and grey heron are likely to be found.

The invertebrate assemblages in formal parks tend to comprise primarily of common, ubiquitous species, again because the diversity of habitats (particularly micro-habitats) is limited. Nevertheless, butterflies such as holly blue and peacock are often present and, where there are areas of wooded habitat, speckled wood butterflies are increasingly common. The commoner dragonfly species (southern hawker, brown hawker and blue-tailed damselfly) are also likely to occur where there are ponds or lakes with some areas of marginal vegetation.

Some parks and amenity grasslands of nature conservation value in Greater London

Brockwell Park, LB Lambeth

Holland Park, LB Kensington and Chelsea

Ravenscourt Park, LB Hammersmith and Fulham

Regent’s Park, City of Westminster and LB Camden

Threats and Opportunities

Threats

The most significant threat to the biodiversity of formal parks, playing fields and amenity open space is unsympathetic management. Intensive management is required to maintain recreational areas, attractive flower beds, sports pitches and other amenity features. However, a more integrated approach to the management, which pays attention to the needs of wildlife and which regards the maintenance of biodiversity as a key management aim, could be introduced in many parks.

Even though the vast majority of playing fields, parks and other amenity open spaces are protected through open space policies in boroughs' Unitary Development Plans (UDPs) there has been a tendency in recent years to dispose of parts of playing fields (especially school playing fields) for development. In addition, there has been a trend of replacing grass sports pitches with artificial turf.

Opportunities

The extensive area of playing fields, formal parks and amenity open space provides enormous potential for habitat enhancement and habitat creation within the limits imposed by the needs of formal recreational and amenity areas. Many parks have been created on areas of open space that once supported semi-natural habitat and this habitat may still survive in certain areas. These relic features can provide the resource from which more extensive areas of grassland or woodland habitats can be restored or recreated. Where there are no remnants of former habitats, habitat creation techniques can be applied to make new habitats (such as ponds or wildflower meadows). Alternatively the existing park maintenance regime can be amended to allow greater structural diversity. Relaxing mowing regimes, cutting hedges less frequently or delaying the removal of accumulated leaf litter are some options.

Many formal parks and playing fields are an important part of open space corridors connecting extant areas of semi-natural habitat. Appreciation of the formal open spaces' context within a corridor can inform decisions about its management that in turn will enhance its value as a green corridor for wildlife.

A significant opportunity for awareness-raising arises as a result of the popularity of parks and open spaces. A far greater number of people are likely to visit their local park or playing field than their local nature reserve. Providing information about the biodiversity of the local park is the first step in promoting a greater appreciation of biodiversity generally.

Data Sources

Carruthers, S., Smart, J., Langton T. & Bellamy, J. (1996). *Open Space in London*. Habitat Handbook 2. GLC.

Dawson, D & Worrell, A (1992). *The amount of each kind of ground cover in Greater London*. LEU

LPAC (1995). *State of the Environment Report for London*.