Marsh violet

Viola palustris

National lead organisation(s):

County lead organisation(s):
The Wildlife Trust and The Greensand Trust

The marsh violet is found throughout Europe and the British Isles and is occasional to locally common in bogs, wet heaths, marshes, *Alnus* and *Salix* carr and wet woods especially on acidic soils where there are wet flushes. In Bedfordshire it is now recorded at only one site at Coopers Hill SSSI near Ampthill and this population is at risk of dying out.

The marsh violet is a low perennial herb with long creeping runners bearing long stalked hairless kidney shaped leaves. Flowering occurs between April-July, the flowers themselves are 10-15mm wide with pale lilac, blunt petals with dark purple veins, and blunt spurs.

Ensuring the survival of the existing population is the main priority for this species. Establishing new populations both at its existing site and on other suitable local sites may also be desirable.

Current status

National status

The marsh violet is found throughout Europe and the British Isles and is occasional to locally common. Losses have taken place in south and east England and central Ireland since 1950 mainly due to agricultural improvement i.e. drainage and peat extraction.

Local status

In Bedfordshire it is now recorded at one site in a small marsh at Coopers Hill SSSI near Ampthill and is considered uncommon. The existing colony is close to dying out.

It was previously recorded from Flitwick Moor SSSI in a wet area near the Flitwick-Greenfield Road and in Folly Wood but was lost, possibly due to being shaded out by excessive tree growth. The Folly Wood site was however described as tree-covered in the Flora of Bedfordshire when it was last recorded so shading may not be such a major factor in its loss. It may also have been present historically at Westoning Moor though this wetland is now gone apart from some small areas of wet woodland and marshy vegetation.

Current factors affecting the Marsh violet

- **Habitat loss** – The main reason for the decline of this species throughout lowland Britain is the drainage of mires. The site at Westoning Moor was lost to drainage though this area is now in set-aside and areas of marshy grassland and rough wetland vegetation still remain. If water levels could be raised it is possible that more of the original wetland vegetation could be re-established.
- **Isolation** – The main local threat is the fact that the species is confined to only one very small area and is at risk of disappearing completely probably due to nutrient rich water entering from the neighbouring rugby club's sewage outfall. It is also possible other local hydrological changes are affecting the habitat making it drier. This has led to encroachment by nettles and bracken that threaten to smother the marsh violet.

Current action

The extant site is in sympathetic management but the area occupied by the marsh violet was not managed for many years and the influx of nutrient rich water has led to it becoming dominated by coarse species such as nettle and bracken. For the past few years the area has been cut and raked annually to reduce the vigour of these species. Light disturbance to the wet ground was also carried out to mimic the effect of trampling by cattle that may help to encourage new plants to germinate.

The population at Coopers Hill has been mapped and counted and is monitored annually by the Wildlife Trust.

In recent years some of the wet woodland at Flitwick Moor SSSI near the Flitwick-Greenfield Road has been coppiced by the Wildlife Trust, although it is not certain if this is exactly where the marsh violet used to be found. Rhododendron was cleared from Folly Wood a few years ago in the approximate area where marsh violet was previously recorded.

The possible site at Westoning Moor is now under set-aside and is included in a larger Farm Action Plan written by FWAG in spring 2002. If the implementation of this Plan is agreed with the farmer it may be possible to get better management of this area, possibly through the Countryside Stewardship Scheme.

Action plan objectives and targets

A. Increase the population at Coopers Hill SSSI to 100 plants by 2010;

B. Establish 2 new populations by 2008.

Proposed action

Abbreviations

BNHS	Bedfordshire Natural History Society
EN	English Nature
GST	The Greensand Trust
WT	The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire

Action	Implemented by
Policy and legislation	
No action proposed	
Site safeguard and management	
a). Ensure the existing site at Coopers Hill SSSI receives appropriate management by cutting and raking of the vegetation in late summer. Cutting earlier in the summer may also be beneficial to further reduce the vigour of the coarse species. More drastic action such as turf stripping to expose bare, wet ground away from the existing colony may expose any seed bank that remains and encourage further colonisation.	WT
b). Ensure that nutrient rich water from the rugby club does not enter the area occupied by the marsh violet at Coopers Hill SSSI.	EN
c). Continue to coppice or clear further areas of wet woodland at Flitwick Moor in the areas previously containing marsh violet to see if it can re-establish itself as recommended by the management plan. Even if unsuccessful this may be a good area to consider a reintroduction.	WT
d). Re-establish wetland habitat at the former site of Westoning Moor by raising water levels on the set-aside land and manage this and the existing wetland vegetation, preferably by some form of grazing regime.	GST
Species management and protection	
No action proposed	
Advisory	
No action proposed	

Action	Implemented by
Future research and monitoring	
a). Survey all sites where historical and unconfirmed records have been obtained to confirm species distribution and status. Particular attention should be paid to the recently coppiced areas at Flitwick Moor near the Flitwick-Greenfield Road, Folly Wood and the Westoning Moor area	GST, WT
b). Establish a monitoring programme for the species at Coopers Hill with a view to understanding the fluctuations in the populations over a number of years (minimum 10 years). Monitoring should take the form of mapping and counting individuals and should include the number of flowering and non-flowering plants.	WT
c). Ensure that records are sent to Biodiversity Recording and Monitoring Centre (BRMC) and the BNHS County Recorder for Plants	BNHS, GST, WT
d). Promote research into the species ecological requirements.	
e). Investigate the feasibility of establishing new populations at suitable sites. Identify the sites and investigate the possibility of introduction using material from Coopers Hill SSSI e.g. Flitwick Moor and Duck End. It may be necessary to take cuttings as there are so few plants at present and they hardly ever flower.	EN, GST, WT
Communication and publicity	
a). Inform landowners and managers about the importance of this species and its management requirements	GST
b). Visit and seek to persuade landowners and managers with suitable sites to participate in the introduction project	GST, WT

Marsh violet

References

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Acknowledgements

This species action plan has been written by Philip Irving, Project Officer, Greensand Trust.

Illustration courtesy of S. Halton.